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OR,

JOE BOWERS' RACKET AT RICAREE CITY.

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AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "KENTUCK, THE
SPORT," "DICK TALBOT," "THE WOLVES
OF NEW YORK," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN.

A NARROW mountain trail in the northwestern part of Montana; the trail followed the course of a small stream, and along the path rode two men, mounted upon the small, mettlesome steeds common to the region.

Both were dressed like cowboys, and armed to the teeth, but there was a wide difference in their appearance, and the material of their costume.

One was a young man, with long, light hair, which floated down over his shoulders, after the fanciful fashion common to the scouts who follow the lead of the renowned Buffalo Bill.

He wore a coat and riding-breeches of black

"I'M JOE BOWERS, THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN, AND IT COSTS TWO BITS TO SEE ME, EVERY TIME!" THE BUMMER DECLARED.

velveteen; high boots—regular dandy cowboy boots—came to his knees. His shirt was of the finest linen, ruffled and embroidered in a most fanciful fashion.

His weapons, a pair of revolvers and a ten-inch bowie-knife, which he wore in the belt of polished leather which girded his waist, were nickel-plated, as handsome tools as any man would care to own.

The broad-brimmed Mexican sombrero which protected his head was heavily ornamented with gold and silver, and, like the boots, was as costly about as money could buy.

The cowboy who sets up for an exquisite pays particular attention to his hat and boots.

Despite the dudish style of his costume, a glance in the face of the man would have told any good judge of character that the rider was a man of firm determination and dauntless courage.

Gilbert Featherstone the horseman was called, and he was the sole owner of the One-Square Ranch situated on the head-waters of Ricaree Creek, which flows into Deep Creek, or Smith's River.

Featherstone, from the peculiar style of his dress, was known far and wide as the Cowboy Dude, but no one presumed to impose on him on that account, for though he might be dudish-looking in his dress and appearance, yet when it came to a fight he was a regular fire-eater, as more than one rough fellow had discovered to his cost.

Featherstone's companion was a thick-set, muscular-looking man of forty or thereabout, with a rough, weather-beaten face, the lower part of which was covered with a short, black beard.

He was an ugly-looking customer, and well deserved the name by which he was commonly known, Black Tom Murphy.

Murphy was the superintendent of the One-Square Ranch and the right-hand man of the cowboy dude.

Featherstone's ranch, by the way, took its name from his brand, which was a square with the figure one in the center.

The trail ran along Ricaree Creek in the foothills of the Big Belt Mountains, and the pair were on their way to the ranch of the Cowboy Dude.

One-Square Ranch was strangely situated.

The country at the junction of Ricaree Creek and Smith's River was rough and rugged, totally unsuited for either ranching or farming, but some adventurous soul had followed the windings of the turbulent mountain stream and discovered that it took its rise in a level, fertile valley, a couple of miles square, but as it was remote from the usual lines of travel—the nearest road being the trail which ran from White Sulphur Springs to Diamond City, passing through the depression in the center of the Big Belt Mountains, which is so great that it seems as if it was arranged that way so that a road could go through—so far off that no one cared to make a settlement in the valley until the Cowboy Dude and his pard, Black Tom Murphy, happened to hear of the place.

They lost no time in examining the valley and after a thorough inspection located there.

It was wild land, subject to entry, and the pards hatched a plan by means of which they secured the greater part of the valley.

According to law a man cannot take up more than a hundred and sixty acres, but there is an old saying, "there is more than one way to kill a cat," and in a case of this kind it is an easy matter for an unscrupulous man to evade the law.

The pards took up their land and built a ranch, then brought in cattle and cowboys, and each cowboy took up land, so that nearly all the valley was possessed.

Improvements were made and the law apparently lived up to, but when the time expired and the Government gave the settlers a clear title, all of them immediately sold out to Featherstone, so that he came in possession of all the valley that was worth anything.

Of course everybody that knew anything at all about this matter knew that it was a swindle; that the men took the land for the express purpose of turning it over to the Cowboy Dude, but so common is this practice that few regard it as being wrong, and the general opinion was that Featherstone showed himself to be a mighty sharp business man.

As it is the nature of mankind to play the goose and "follow my leader," other settlers came into the valley and took up land, although the Cowboy Dude had taken every foot that was good for anything, but these men soon made the discovery that Featherstone was an extremely bad neighbor.

They were subjected to all sorts of annoyances and the most of them were glad to get out.

It was not possible for them to prove that it was the owner of the One-Square Ranch who was at the bottom of this mischief, and he was always ready to pay a fair sum to the men who were anxious to sell.

But there was one obstinate man who held on to his land and boldly declared that he did not intend to be driven away, and he openly said that it was the Cowboy Dude who was responsible for the trouble.

He was warned that his indiscreet utterances

would be apt to make trouble for him, but he was headstrong and laughed at the caution.

One morning he was found dead, lying just astride his little sod house, with a bullet through his heart.

There was no clew to the murderer, and none was ever discovered; in fact, nobody troubled their heads about the matter.

The sheriff came up from Smithville, the nearest town, and county seat, but his examinations did not amount to anything, and so the tragedy passed into history, as one of the strange crimes not likely ever to be brought home to the guilty man.

By exerting his powerful influence, it seemed likely that the Cowboy Dude would be able to keep out of the valley all settlers whose absence he considered to be better than their company, when a discovery was made which upset this completely.

Gold was found in the mountain gulches in the neighborhood of Ricaree Valley, not in large quantities, so as to warrant the erection of extensive reduction works, but it was in such a shape that ordinary miners, with common tools, could make good day's wages.

So the camp called Ricaree City was founded. It was easy enough for the Cowboy Dude and his satellites to make things so hot in the valley that the few settlers were glad to get out, but when the miners came it was plain that no such game could be worked on them.

At the beginning it looked as if all the neighborhood country would be overrun by the gold-seekers, for there was a regular boom for a while; but it did not take long for the thing to "play out," and Ricaree City from a population of a thousand, dropped to about fifty.

The men who remained had secured claims which paid them fairly, and so they held on.

After the fashion of those little settlements in the Far West, the "city" had taken on metropolitan airs and boasted a mayor and a marshal, but neither of the officials had much to do, although it was well known that Ricaree City was one of the "hardest" camps in Montana.

Its isolated situation, neighborhood to the broken and rugged Big Belt Mountain region, where fugitives could readily find concealment from pursuit, had continued to render it a refuge for criminals whose acts had made them outlaws.

"Birds of a feather flock together," it is an old saying and an extremely true one. A man who had sought refuge in flight from the heavy hand of the law found congenial associates in the little, lonely mountain camp, and the plain, straight-forward, honest man who happened to locate in Ricaree City was apt to discover before he had been there long that his neighbors were not the kind of people he had been used to living with, and if he was at all particular about his associates, he would get out as soon as he could conveniently.

Yet, wild and lawless as were the people who dwelt in the mountain camp, they got along quite peaceably, and there were few disturbances.

Every man knew that every other man was armed as well as himself, and so was slow to provoke a quarrel unless he meant business.

If two men came to the conclusion that the earth was not big enough to hold both of them, it was considered the proper caper for them to march out to the level plains just beyond the town, and there with the weapons of their choice settle the question as to which one should be transplanted to another world.

These affairs were always conducted in the most open manner, and a goodly number of the citizens made a point of attending, so as to see that the encounter was conducted fairly.

And the coroner's jury, when it came to sit on the body, always returned a verdict of "accidental death."

Ricaree City prided itself upon attending to these matters in first-class eastern style.

And so zealous were the inhabitants that the law should be respected, that when a drunken stranger, thinking that he was in a camp where every liberty was permitted, drew a pistol without warning upon a man with whom he quarreled, and shot his antagonist in the shoulder, the crowd seized the man, tied him to a convenient tree in front of the hotel, the principal house in the camp, and flogged him until he howled for mercy.

Then he was released and warned to depart, coupled with the injunction never to dare show his face in the Ricaree Valley again.

"If you had killed the man we would have hung you, sure!" was the parting salutation of the citizens, and they meant it, too, every word.

The Cowboy Dude and his superintendent were on their way home, returning from Smithville.

At the next turn of the road they would come in sight of the valley of Ricaree.

The camp was situated at the lower end of the valley, convenient to the gulches where the gold had been found.

Around the bend in the trail rode the horsemen, the cabins of the town came in view; this sight they expected to see, but another one met their eyes for which they were not prepared.

Sitting upon a rock, up above the level of their

heads, which jutted out from the cliff side, was a strange-looking figure.

"A fat, jolly-looking man, clad in a most miserable fashion."

His flannel shirt had once been red, but now it had faded into about a dozen different colors; his coat was as bad as the shirt, and his breeches had been patched with so many different pieces of cloth, no two of them alike, that it was hard work to tell what the original color of the garment had been; his boots were so dilapidated that it was not only a wonder how he managed to walk in them, but how he continued to keep them on his feet at all, and most assuredly the soles and uppers would have parted company if it had not been for the stout cords which were bound around his feet.

But the oddest feature of the man's unique costume was his hat. It was a dirty brown in color with a high peaked crown and a rolling brim, so softened by use that it could be rolled up and stuck into a pocket like a handkerchief, and this wonderful creation he wore jauntily cocked over his right eye, and the brim hung down behind forming a background for his red face, fringed by the carrot-colored hair, which looked as if it had never felt the touch of a comb.

So surprised were the horsemen upon coming so unexpectedly upon this strange figure that, involuntarily, they pulled up their steeds and stared in astonishment.

The stranger grinned in a jolly way.

"I'm Joe Bowers, the old man of the mountain, and it costs two bits to see me, every time!" the bummer declared.

"Well, who the deuce are you and where did you come from?" Featherstone asked.

"Me name it is Joe Bowers,
From England I did come!"

sung the stranger in a voice which the use of strong liquor had rendered extremely uncertain.

If the readers who peruse these lines have ever read any of the Dick Talbot novels they will at once remember the irrepressible Joe Bowers, the veteran bummer, Injun Dick's faithful follower, who is about as odd a character as the annals of the Wild West can show.

"Oh, your name is Bowers, eh?" Featherstone remarked.

"It is, me noble dook!" cried the bummer in the absurd, theatrical way so common to him.

"I'm a gentleman of high degree and you kin bet yer boots on it too."

"You look a durned sight more like a scare-crow!" Black Tom Murphy observed.

"Judge not by me apparel—there's many an honest heart beats beneath a ragged coat!" Joe Bowers spouted.

"Well, if a man's honesty is to be judged by the badness of his clothes then you ought to rank high," Featherstone observed, sarcastically.

"Oh, I do," and the bummer grinned and bowed as though he thought he had received a compliment. "When it comes to honesty I am away up at the top of the tree and don't you forget it!"

"Mebbe you ar', but I should hate to trust to your word," Black Tom Murphy growled.

For some unaccountable reason he had taken a dislike to the fat stranger.

"Pardner, I am a reg'lar jewel of a man—a diamond of the first water!" Joe Bowers declared with a flourish of his fat and extremely dirty hand.

"It is true that I am a leetle under the weather now, but that is from circumstances beyond my control. When I started out from White Sulphur Springs I had a good hoss and a fair outfit of clothes, but on the road I met a gentle galoot who persuaded me, by means of a revolver, that I would be doing a Christian act if I made him a present of my hoss and changed duds with him, besides letting him have what leetle valuables I possessed, for, as he kindly remarked, I might meet some rascal on the road who would go through me."

"He cleaned you out, eh?" Featherstone said.

"Well, gentlemen, if he didn't do the job up slicker than a whistle, you may take my head for a football."

"Then you are broke?" the rancher remarked.

"Yes, sir-ee! If gold-mines were selling for two bits apiece, I couldn't raise enuff to buy a smell of one!" the bummer declared.

"I don't see what you want up in this region," Black Tom Murphy remarked. "This is a mighty rough country for a man without money."

"Well, as this 'ere town of Ricaree is a new camp, I thought there might be an opening for a man of genius like myself!" the bummer said, with a pompous air.

"I reckon that you had better turn round and hoof it in the opposite direction," the rancher observed. "You will find that there isn't any room in Ricaree City for men like yourself."

"Oh, you don't know me yet—you don't know what a gay and genial cuss I am," Joe Bowers replied. "I kin turn my hand to almost anything. I am a reg'lar genius, I am."

"Yes, you look like one," Murphy declared, with a snort of contempt.

"Oh, I am, and the fact that you can see it proves that you are a man with a big head," the bummer responded, pretending to believe that the other was in earnest.

"I kin juggle tumblers abind a bar as well as any man w'ot ever throw'd liker into a glass in Montana. I'm a pretty fair miner, kin hold my end up in a short-card game with the best of the sharps, and when it comes to a tussle with the tiger, I reckon I kin git as much out of his claws as any man on this hyer footstool; then I don't take a back seat as a cowboy; and that reminds me, I reckon that you are the big-bug rancher up in this region, the boss of the One-Square Ranch."

"Yes, I am the party," Featherstone replied.

"Well, now, a galoot who passed me on the road a while ago, said as how he reckoned you would be along pretty soon, 'cos you were a-getting ready to leave Smithville when he started."

"What of it?" the rancher demanded, shortly.

"I want a job on yer ranch," Bowers explained.

Featherstone shook his head.

"Nary chance?" the bummer exclaimed.

"No, I have all the help I want. Besides if I wanted men I would not take one like you; you are no cowboy, and you would not be worth your salt."

"Sport, I am like a singed cat!" the bummer declared. "I am a durned sight better than I look. I am a mighty good cowboy, now I tell yer, as cowboys run, and then think how fine it would be to have a galoot like me on yer ranch, for when you wanted to drive 'dull care away you could allers git me drunk and have fun with me!" and a broad grin appeared on the face of the bummer as he made this novel announcement.

"Well, I don't think I care to have any fun in that way," Featherstone replied.

"Then you can't make room for me on your ranch?" the bummer said, apparently not in the least put out by the refusal.

"No, I can't!"

"Ah, that's a fall to proud ambition!" Joe Bowers declared. "Now, if I was an ordinary kind of a cuss I would be all broke up at this hyer disappointment, but you see it does not phase me in the least, and that is the sort of a hair-pin, I am!"

"Sports, kin I strike you for two-bits apiece to help me on my way?" the bummer asked, insinuatingly. "It is awful rocky, you know, for a man to strike a town whar he don't know a soul without a cent in his pocket."

"I have no money to waste on men of your stamp!" the rancher replied, roughly. "And my advice to you is to turn your back on this valley and get out of this section as soon as possible, for if the men of this camp find out that you are nothing but a drunken bummer they will be apt to make it warm for you."

"I will give you a dollar to buy a rope to hang yourself with," Black Tom Murphy exclaimed, as the two rode on.

"Oh, you will, will you, you black-muzzled robber!" the bummer muttered between his teeth as he gazed after the two. "You had better keep your ducat to buy a rope for your own hanging, although that will hardly be necessary for when Judge Lynch gits after you he will bring the rope with him."

"The feller that passed along said he reckoned I wouldn't make much out of the Cowboy Dude, and he was right."

"The rancher and his pard are a couple of rascals, if I am any judge, and mebbe I will have a chance to get square with them before I quit this hyer town."

"And now I will try my luck in the camp," and the bummer descended to the road.

"This hyer Ricaree City is mine oyster which I with wit will open!" Joe Bowers declared, as he strode onward.

CHAPTER II.

PISTOL PETE.

"It is all a toss up whether I strike a good-natured cuss who will let me touch him for a stake or a cross-grained galoot likely to boot me out of his shebang," the bummer muttered, as he trudged along. "It is all a lottery and I must chance it, so I will go for the first opening."

The camp consisted of a single street only, and the majority of the houses were of the rudest construction.

After passing six or eight cabins the veteran came to a saloon, a good-sized one-storied shanty, which over the door bore a rude sign representing a revolver, and under it was inscribed in extremely ill-shaped letters, the inscription:

PISTOL PETE'S PALACE.

Joe Bowers stopped and examined the sign for a moment, then he shook his head and muttered:

"Well, durn my cats! I have seen a good many rocky signs in my life, but I will be blamed if this hyer ain't the rockiest of them all. And a gay old place this is for some, but Pistol Pete is a good name, though; that's no reason why he shouldn't be my meat as well as any man I kin strike in the town."

"Lemme see—whar did I see him? I reckon it must have been in Denver."

And then into the saloon marched the veteran. There was only one man in the place—the proprietor evidently, a tall, lanky man, a typical Westerner with a long, thin face, high cheekbones and a billy-goat beard.

He was seated in an arm-chair, at a table, and was busily engaged in shuffling a pack of cards.

When the bummer's shadow darkened the doorway he dropped his cards and made a movement as though to rise, thinking that a customer was coming, but upon inspecting the new-comer he had doubts in regard to this, and so he settled back in his chair and took up his cards again.

The moment Joe Bowers got well into the saloon so that he could get a good view of the owner he struck an attitude of surprise.

"Is it possible? kin I believe the evidence of my blessed optics? Do I behold that great king-pin of sports, Pistol Pete? Why, Petey, old times rocks, how are you?" And with outstretched hand Joe Bowers advanced toward the saloon-keeper.

But that worthy did not appear to be at all desirous of reciprocating.

"Rats!" he exclaimed. "What leetle game are you trying to play now, anyway?"

"Is it possible, Petey, old pard, that you don't remember me?"

"Naw, I don't!" the saloon-keeper growled. "I never laid eyes on you afore."

"Why, yes, you did," Joe Bowers exclaimed, affecting to be greatly surprised. "Don't you remember them gay old days in Denver when you was jest a-running the town?"

"Never was in Denver in my life!" declared the other.

"Is that so?" the veteran bummer asked with a look of profound astonishment. "Well, mebbe, I have got the town wrong. I never had no great head for gitting towns right, anyway, but I can't be mistaken in your noble self. When I came hoofing it along the road, and me peepers caught sight of this hyer sign of yours, then back to me memory came the halcyon days of yore, and I sed to myself, sed I, I am willing to bet a hat that this hyer Pistol Pete is the same wonderful galoot that I once knew; the man was all wool and a yard wide!"

"Too thin! your leetle game won't work!" the saloon-keeper declared. "Better travel right along! Open the door and let the wind blow you out!"

"Is it possible that you don't remember me? Are you going back on yer old pard, the original Joe Bowers?"

"Oh, I know you now; your name is Old Benzine!" the other exclaimed in a sarcastic way.

"You're the cuss who kin light a match by blowing your breath on it, and you want to be keeful how you poke that nose of yours near any gunpowder if you ain't anxious to be blown sky-high."

The veteran burst into a loud laugh.

"Petey, you allers were a genial cuss!" he declared. "I have seen many a man set up to be a joker, but you are the chief of them all. I s'pose you feel like opening wine, now, in honor of your old friend, but I don't want you to do that; plain whisky is good enuff for me."

"You will find plenty of water in the crick, and you had better vamore now, mighty lively, too!"

"Well, Petey, I never thought that you would go back on an old pard!" and the veteran bummer shook his head in a disconsolate way.

"Go-long! I never saw you before in my life, and I don't know you from a side of sole leather," Pistol Pete declared.

"I s'pose if I should strike you for the loan of a dollar until I sell my dog that you wouldn't see the bluff?"

"Not much! I wouldn't go a quarter on you!" was the emphatic reply.

"Ah, what does the poet say? 'Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn!'" declared Joe Bowers with great dramatic dignity.

"Give us a rest! I reckon that you are a leetle off yer nut! Git a move on now, before I rise and fire you out."

"Oh, that is all right; don't trouble yourself on my account, I only stopped in to see how you was getting along."

During this conversation Pistol Pete had been busily engaged shuffling the cards, and Joe Bowers had kept his eyes upon him.

"Say, Petey, you may be away up at the top of the heap with a pistol, but you can't handle the pasteboards for shucks!" the veteran exclaimed.

"Oh, can't I?" cried the other angrily. "Mebbe you kin show me how."

"You jest bet I kin!" the veteran declared in the most confident way. "You are trying to do the pass, and a bad fist you are making of it, too, me noble lord; but it takes a good pasteboard juggler to do the pass so that the trick can't be detected. It is no easy job to take the bottom half of the pack and put it in the place of the top half, while a man is apparently only shuffling the keerds, and an extra good man alone kin do it, for the operation knocks out the cut entirely, as the cards are put back in just the position that they were in before the cut was made. The cut, you know, mighty satrap, is designed to break up any leetle arrangements of

the cards that the dealer may have worked during the shuffle, but it stands to reason that if he is skillful enough to do the pass act, he kin pull off his trick without any trouble."

"You have got the gift of the gab, sure enuff," the saloon-keeper observed, "but I doubt very much if you kin handle the cards one-half as well as you kin talk about it. I reckon you must have been a parson some time, or else you never would be able to sling words around so lively."

"Nary parson!" Bowers replied; "but I reckon my tongue is pretty limber."

"Limber! well, I should smile!" the saloon-keeper declared. "It 'pears to me that it is loose at both ends, with a j'int in the middle. But, I say: if you kin handle the pasteboards worth a cent, you have jest struck the right town. This is the biggest camp for card-playing that kin be scared up in all Montana. We go the hull hog hyer, bristles and all!"

"Oh, it does me proud to hear sich an account!" Joe Bowers declared joyfully. "I shall feel right at home."

"Our champion sharp is a man called Billy Keene, or Keen Billy, as the boys generally twist his name, and I reckon he kin handle the pasteboards about as well as the man w'ot made 'em," Pistol Pete declared. "I have been stacking up ag'in' him for a week or so now, and, consarn his pictur', he cleans me out 'bout every time; one of the sharps who pretends to know a heap about cards put me up to this pass trick, as you call it, and I war a-practicing of it, with the idee, if I could git it down fine, of ringing it in on Keen Billy the next time we set down for a leetle game of draw, but I will be blamed if I kin git the bang of the thing."

"Lemme show your royal nibs how the thing is worked," the veteran bummer remarked.

He approached the table, Pistol Pete gave him the cards, and Joe Bowers shuffled them with the air of a man who had been there many a time before.

"Now, Petey, 'old pard, jest keep yer eyes peeled, watch me all you know how! See, hyer is the ace of diamonds at the bottom of the pack," and the veteran held the cards up so that the other could see that the ace of diamonds was in the position he indicated.

"Now cut 'em, Petey?" and Joe Bowers, with a flourish of his hand, presented the cards to the saloon-keeper.

Pistol Pete obeyed the injunction, separating the cards into two parts.

"Keep your optics right on me, now, and see if you kin detect when I do the little hunky-punky trick," and as he spoke Bowers apparently brought the two halves together, which would place the ace of diamonds in the center of the pack.

There was a smart snap as the severed pack came together and Bowers asked:

"Whar is that ace of diamonds now?"

"In the center of the pack, and I have got good money to back up my say-so!" Pistol Pete declared, in the most positive manner.

He had not taken his eyes from the cards and was satisfied that the two halves of the pack were exactly as they had been cut, and he reckoned that the previous flourish and snap that the stranger had produced when bringing the cards together, had been for the purpose of deceiving him.

"How much will you go on that—ten dollars?"

"No, I reckon five is enuff."

"It is a go then! Five ducats that the ace of diamonds ain't in the center of the pack!"

"Five that it is—you can't fool me—"

And what more the saloon-keeper would have said is uncertain, for Joe Bowers cut short his speech by exhibiting the ace of diamonds at the bottom of the pack, in exactly the same position that it had been before the cut was made. The veteran had made the pass.

Pistol Pete stared in astonishment; he could hardly believe that it could be possible.

"You see, high and mighty satrap, this hyer leetle trick goes to show how true is the old saying that a man's hands are a mighty sight quicker than his eyes," the veteran bummer observed.

"And now, old pard, I will trouble you for that little five ducats, if you please," and Joe Bowers replaced the pack of cards on the table as he spoke.

"Well, I don't know 'bout that!" the saloon-keeper growled, looking extremely disgusted.

"Didn't I do the trick?" the other demanded.

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt 'bout that, but I reckon you was a-kinder playing roots on me for to git a bet on it!"

"Noblest Roman of them all! it was your own idee!" the veteran replied with great dignity.

"You made the offer of yer own free will. Of course I took you up. It was as easy for me to do the trick as to turn my hand over."

"Yes, but if I had won I reckon I wouldn't have got no five dollars out of you!" Pistol Pete exclaimed in a sulky way.

"Now don't you make the mistake of judging by appearances!" Joe Bowers remarked in a blithe and cheerful manner. "The man who judges by appearances will often get left. This hyer is my traveling suit. This is a mighty rough country, you know, for a man to travel

about alone, and I allers make it a point to rig myself up so that if thar are any toll gatherers on the road they will be apt to let me slide."

"That is a good yarn to tell, but I ain't believing all I hear now-a-days," Pistol Pete declared with a sneer.

"Oh, pard, if you will jest recall those gay old days of yore you will remember that the original Joe Bowers was allers safe to tie to!" the veteran exclaimed in a reproachful way.

"Oh, bosh! You can't play that on me!" the saloon-keeper declared. "I reckon that you jest came in hyer so as to get a chance to beat me out of my scads, and nary five dollars will I pay you unless you show up five so as to prove that you could have paid the bet if you had lost."

"Now what kind of way is that to treat a man?" Joe Bowers demanded. "I speak more in sorrow than in anger, but, Petey, old man, you are giving me a rough deal!"

"I will tell you what I will do," Pistol Pete observed, after thinking over the matter for a moment. "If you kin show me how to work that pass, as you call it, I will go you a saw-buck—a good ten ducats!"

"I reckon, my gentle Petey, that we cannot trade," Joe Bowers remarked, edging off toward the door as he spoke. "I might labor with you for a month of Sundays, and when I got through you would not be any nearer to doing the trick than you are now. The fact is, old pard, your fingers are all thumbs, and the Lord never intended you for a card-sharp; so-long!"

And the veteran retreated through the door followed by a torrent of abuse from the saloon-keeper.

"Well, I slipped up that time, and no mistake," Joe Bowers muttered as he went on down the street. "But that galoot hasn't got any sporting blood in his veins or else he would not have backed out of his bet when I had won his money as fair as fair kin be."

"Pistol Pete! bah! that is only a bluff; I will bet he can't hit the side of a house, but I will git square with him one of these days."

"I reckon I must hunt up this Keen Billy, and I shouldn't be surprised if I found him to be a sharp of the first water. If he is, I reckon he will be willing to stake me when he discovers what a genius I am."

CHAPTER III.

THE SPORT.

ACTING on this idea, the veteran inquired of an old Irishman, who was smoking a pipe and sunning himself in front of a shanty a hundred feet down the road from Pistol Pete's Palace, where he could find the man known as Keen Billy.

The Irishman pointed out a solitary cabin standing all alone up on the hillside, and as Joe Bowers climbed the little path which led to it he could not help noticing how admirably the cabin was situated for defensive purposes.

The ground was rough and uneven, and there was no way of getting at the cabin except by following the path.

In the hillside, which rose steep and abrupt from the level of the little foot-hill which intervened between it and the valley, was a natural depression, and in this the cabin had been built.

There was no way of getting at the building except by the front approach, and it was plain that a skillful marksman would have little difficulty in holding the house against a large force.

"Looks as if this hyer sport calculated that somebody might want to go for his scalp some day, and he determined to start in with the advantages on his side, and this goes to show that this particular galoot has got a long head," Joe Bowers remarked, as he noted the advantages of the situation.

The sun shone full on the front of the cabin, and when the veteran got so he could command a good view of it, he saw that the door was open and a good-looking man of thirty or thereabouts, with clean-cut, regular features, dark hair and piercing black eyes, sat in the doorway reading a newspaper.

And as Bowers came nearer, he noticed that the man was built in such a way as to give promise that he possessed unusual strength, and the form of his features indicated that he was both resolute and daring.

He was nicely dressed in dark clothes, but wore no vest, a fawn-colored flannel shirt, belted in at the waist by a leather girdle with revolvers attached, covering his chest.

"Now, this hyer sharp looks like the genuine article," Joe Bowers remarked, as he examined the other with a critical eye. "No galoot of the Pistol Pete stamp this time."

The sport had not apparently paid any attention to the approach of the stranger, but Joe Bowers conjectured that his ascent of the hillside had not been unnoticed, and he was confirmed in this impression by the fact that when he got within fifty feet of the reader he laid his newspaper on his lap and, looking toward his visitor, nodded in a friendly way.

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Mister William Keene?" Joe Bowers exclaimed, in his

pompous, theatrical way, and he made a low bow.

He had advanced until he stood within six feet of the sport.

The sharp laid back in his chair and laughed.

"You really must excuse my smiling," he said, "but it is so long since anybody has taken the trouble to address me by my full name, and in such a first-class eastern style, that the novelty kinder breaks me up. Billy Keene, or Keen Billy most generally, is good enough for the boys in this camp."

"That is the free and easy style of this hyer glorious wild and woolly West," Joe Bowers remarked with a good-natured grin.

"Yes, the men out in this region don't go much on ceremony."

"Well, Billy, I am glad to see you," the bumper announced, with another respectful duck of his head. "I s'pose I might as well drop the mister business, or some of the boys will be wanting to make a target of me on account of putting on airs. Allow me to have the honor of introducing myself: I am the old, original Joe Bowers, that is the only handle I have ever had, but since I struck this town a slab-sided galoot suggested that I ought to be called Old Benzine, and do you know, Billy, I have kinder taken a fancy to that appellation, and I think I will cling to it in the future. I have h'isted benzine enough in my time to entitle me to the name, and mebbe it will bring me good luck."

"Well, stranger, I trust you will excuse me if I remark that you certainly look as if you needed a little run of luck to come your way," the sport remarked, with a look at the well-worn clothes of the other.

"Oh, I am away down to the bed-rock; thar ain't any doubt about that," Joe Bowers admitted, but he spoke in the most cheerful manner, seemingly not at all depressed. "And the luck I have had lately has been awful."

Then he related how he had been robbed on the road.

"Well, that was tough luck."

"And the worst of it is, the thing seems to be a-following me right up," and then he told the story of his interview with Pistol Pete.

The sharp listened attentively, and when the veteran finished he indulged in a hearty burst of laughter.

"The idea of that blockhead trying anything of the kind!" Keen Billy exclaimed. "The clumsy lout! He can no more educate his fingers to do tricks with the pasteboards than he can tap pine trees and get whisky out of them."

"His 'ettle game is to get fixed to clean you out," Joe Bowers suggested.

"Yes, I know that; he has been after me at odd times ever since I struck the town," Keen Billy remarked. "He has had a good deal of dumb luck since he set up his shebang here, and he got the notion into his head that he was a sport from Sportville; but when he came to stack up against me, he speedily discovered the difference between playing cards with a lot of ignorant jacks who were not skillful enough to play for sour apples, and setting down with a sharp who understood the points of the game, and had both sand and money to back his cards."

"Yes, he admitted to me that you had cleaned him out without any trouble."

The sport laughed.

"He owned up, eh?"

"Oh, he did!"

"Well, I wonder at it, for men of his stamp are seldom willing to admit that they ever get the worst of anything."

"And he was practicing with the keerdies jest so as to be able to skin you out of your ducats."

"He will have to get a new pair of hands and a brand new head before he will be able to accomplish that feat!" Keen Billy declared, contemptuously. "Why, the fact that you were able to beat him out of five dollars on that old, worn-out trick shows what kind of a man he is with the papers."

"I did it as slick as a whistle, but he wouldn't come up with the ducats. He crawled out on the excuse that I hadn't five dollars—that I couldn't have paid if I had lost."

"And if you had shown up the five the chances are big that he would not have paid," the sport observed. "He would have found some other excuse so as to get out of paying. He is a fraud of the first water!"

"And is he away up at the top of the heap with a gun?" Joe Bowers asked.

"All that anybody knows about the matter is from his say-so. He claims the name of Pistol Pete, and says he is a bad man, but whether he is a king-pin with a revolver, and a man who likes to go around starting graveyards, no one knows," the sport replied. "I do not really know much about the man, for I am a newcomer in the camp," he continued. "I have only been here a little over a month, but from what I have heard from the old-timers of the town I should judge that he is not particularly dangerous."

"One of the galoots whose bark is a good deal worse than his bite, eh?" Joe Bowers observed.

"Yes, I reckon that is about the size of it. But, I say, sit down and make yourself comfortable. It is just as cheap to sit as to stand,"

and Keen Billy waved his hand to a round-topped boulder, which jutted out of the ground a yard from the door.

"Me noble lord, you do me proud!" exclaimed the veteran, with an elaborate bow as he took his seat upon the rock. "I s'pose I have made it plain to you that I am clear to the end of my rope. This hyer Pistol Pete dared me to put up five ducats, but if it had been five nickels it would have been all the same; neither the one nor the other could I have shown up. From his name I reckoned that he was a sport, and I sailed in to interview him with the idea that I might strike him for a small stake so I could have a chance to get on my legs ag'in, for, as a rule, I kin generally take care of myself if I only have half a show."

"He is no sport!" the other declared. "He is a whisky-seller, and if you were to suggest to him that sports ought to stand by each other, and that when a sport was unfortunate enough to go broke it was the duty of a brother sport, who was flush, to stake him, he would undoubtedly think that it was a ridiculous idea."

"I reckon he would, but I did not get a chance to suggest anything of the kind to him," Joe Bowers remarked. "When the chance came for me to make five out of him I went for it, for I would a heap sight rather get a stake that way than to ask a man for it, but arter I skinned him he got so riley 'bout it that I had to git out."

"And then you hunted me up. I suppose you had an idea from what he said that I was a different sort of a chap from this Pistol Pete?"

"Yes, I reckoned that you were a true sport, and no make-believe."

"By the way, have you had any breakfast?" asked Keen Billy, abruptly.

"Nary a bite, and I am jest a-dying for my morning bitters, and that galoot of a Pistol Pete never had the decency to ask if I had a mouth on me!" the veteran exclaimed in a tone full of disgust.

"Oh, he is a hog!" the sport declared. "But I can give you a drink of whisky and a cup of coffee with some hard-tack, which will brace you up," Keen Billy remarked, rising as he spoke. "You see I keep bachelor's hall here, and as it happens I made more coffee this morning than I wanted, so there is a cup left."

Then the sport went into the cabin, while Joe Bowers mentally thanked his stars that his lines had fallen into such a pleasant place.

Keen Billy soon returned with a flask and a tin cup in one hand, and a small coffee-pot in the other.

"Help yourself," he said, giving the cup and flask to the veteran.

Bowers lost no time in complying, and took a generous drink of the whisky.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips, "that is the elixir of life. That is the stuff to stiffen a man's backbone!"

"Yes, or make it extremely weak and limber if he takes enough of the fluid," the sport observed.

"Ah, yes, thar's a bull temperance sermon in that observation, but I don't use it as a beverage, I take it as a medicine, you know," and then the veteran bumper grinned.

"I reckon that you are sick pretty often," Keen Billy remarked.

Then he put the flask in his pocket and filled the tin cup with coffee. This done he carried the coffeepot into the cabin and returned with a big spoon full of sugar and a couple of the large, hard crackers, commonly called pilot bread, but universally known throughout the West since the army days as hard-tack.

"Aha! this is a banquet fit for the gods!" Joe Bowers exclaimed in his absurd, theatrical way. And then he proceeded to attack the crackers and coffee in a style which plainly showed he was exceedingly hungry.

The sport resumed his seat and watched his guest eat for a few minutes, and then said:

"Do you calculate to make a living as a sport in this camp?"

"Sich was me designs, high and mighty sat-rap," the veteran replied, with his mouth full.

The sport shook his head.

"Don't think there is room, eh?" the other asked.

"Well, yes, there is room enough, as far as that goes; the camp is not crowded with sports; in fact, I may say that I am the only one in the place who makes a business of it. There used to be about a dozen, but this camp is not what it was. The boom is all over, and as the pigeons have departed, the hawks have also taken flight. Ricaree City is nothing but a steady, quiet little town now, and unless some new mining discoveries are made, the chances are that in a year or so there will not be ten people in the place."

"Is that so?"

"That is the outlook. No big leads have been struck—nothing to warrant the forming of a mining company, and the erection of reduction works. There is a little surface gold in the gulches, which individual miners are getting, making fair wages, but nothing more, and the news of a big strike anywhere within a hundred miles would about depopulate the town. There are a few cowboys on the One-Square Ranch, up the valley, who help to make things lively

once a month when they are paid off, and if it was not for the cowboys the camp would be as dull as dish-water."

"You don't say so?" Joe Bowers exclaimed in wonder.

"I am giving you the squarest kind of a lay-out!" Keen Billy declared.

"Well, sport, seeing that things are so dull how comes it that a man like yourself is content to remain in such a town?" Joe Bowers questioned.

"There are reason for it of course," the sport replied.

"I don't know nothing 'bout you, seeing as you are a stranger to me," the veteran remarked. "But I allers set myself up as being a good judge of men, and I should reckon from what I have seen of you, as well as from yer name, that you would be able to hold yer end up almost anywhere, and I don't see why you want to waste yer time in this camp when you might make a good thing of it somewhere else."

"That is well argued," the sport replied. "There is a reason, and I don't mind telling you what it is; and the reason which keeps me in Ricaree City is also the one, I reckon, which holds about nine out of every ten of the inhabitants of the place."

"Is that so?" Joe Bowers ejaculated in wonder.

"Yes, and it will not take me long to explain the matter," the sport remarked. "As you are probably aware, since you have footed it over the trail, this is about as isolated a camp as can be found in Montana and I don't believe that anywhere in the West a rougher road can be struck than the one which leads to it."

"That is a fact!" Joe Bowers declared. "I reckon I am a pretty good judge 'bout a thing of that sort, for a man would be safe in betting a big pile that there isn't many galoots who kin be scared up anywhere who knows this hyer Wild Western land better than I do, and I must say I never struck a rougher road."

"The nearest town is Smithville which does not amount to anything, and no man is ever apt to come from there up here unless urgent business brings him, so it is safe to say that when a fellow takes up his residence in this neck of the woods he is not apt to be troubled by strangers calling upon him."

"I reckon not!" the veteran exclaimed.

"The camp has dwindled down so that the hack line only runs once a week, and then it is more for the mail and Express matter than for passengers, so that if a man wanted to hide himself away from the world, it is doubtful if he could find any better place than this camp, that is unless he went away all alone by himself in the great northwestern wilderness and hid himself in the woods, remote from all civilization."

"I reckon I kin see what you are driving at," Joe Bowers remarked. "The men in this hyer camp are ones who, as the poet remarks, have left their country for their country's good."

"Yes, that is the way the most of us dwellers in this camp are situated, I reckon," the sport observed. "Now, in my own case, I had the ill-luck to get involved in a difficulty with a certain man in a certain town; I was a little quicker on the 'draw' than he was, and so managed to come out first best, but as my opponent had a heap of relatives and friends in the town, while I was a stranger, and almost unknown, there was a terrible time kicked up about the matter, and if the crowd had been able to get hold of me they undoubtedly would have hung me without troubling judge or jury."

"I reckon that you lit out," the veteran observed, with a grin.

"You are right, I did, and my foes followed on my trail like a pack of hounds. They were eager for my blood, and swore that they would have my life if they had to hunt me clear to the Pacific Ocean."

"Well, now, I reckon they were just fierce and awful cusses!"

"There isn't any kind of chase so exciting as the one where a human is the game, you know," the sport remarked.

"Oh, you kin bet a pile of rocks on that!" Joe Bowers declared. "I have been there myself, and I know how it is."

"For a month the gang managed to make it pretty lively for me, and half a dozen times I only managed to get away from them by the skin of my teeth, as it were," Keen Billy declared. "Then I happened to hear of this camp, and when I learned all the particulars in regard to it I saw that it was just the place for me, so I made a double on my track—started as if I was going to the southeast, and instead came northwest; the trick threw the hounds off the track, and I succeeded in reaching this camp all right."

"And I s'pose you feel safe hyer?"

"Yes, for it is such an out-of-the-way spot that it is not likely that my foes will be able to ever discover that I am here, and if they do it does not matter much, for they will not be able to harm me," the sport remarked. "As I hinted to you there is hardly a man in the town who is not 'wanted,' as these bloodhounds of the law say, somewhere for something, and, consequently, if any officers or private foes attempted to get at a man, who had taken refuge in this camp,

the entire town would rise as one man to defend him."

"Yes, yes, I kin understand that," Joe Bowers observed with a solemn shake of the head. "I have struck camps of this hyer kind afore."

"In the first place the nature of the surrounding country is such that if a man had an hour's start, and was acquainted with the lay of the land, it would be almost an impossibility for strangers to catch him, and then the citizens of the camp would not permit any pursuit to be made, unless there was men enough in the party to clean out the entire valley."

"Well, it seems as if things were pretty nicely fixed hyer," the other remarked, thoughtfully.

"But I say, s'pose three or four men, who were arter some particular galoot, who had sought refuge in this camp, should sneak into the town in disguise, making out, you know, that they were miners, and watch their chance to gobble the cuss they wanted?"

"They would have to play a pretty deep game, and they would never take their man out alive, for the trail winds around in such a crooked way that there are a dozen places where by means of a short cut the party in retreating could be ambushed and cut off," the sport replied. "And then the men in the town are wide awake too, and it would be a hard matter for men in disguise to sneak into the camp and keep their business a secret, as you will see after you have been here a while."

"I ain't afeared of anybody looking arter me!" the veteran declared. "I don't come hyer to trouble nobody, and I reckon I kin make a living out of these cowboys if I have half a chance."

"Oh, I think you will get along, and here is ten for a starter," and the sport handed over a ten-dollar bill, which Bowers accepted with a profusion of thanks.

"Now you must go and report to the mayor of the camp, Big John Valentine. You will find him at the National Hotel. That is one of the laws of the town," the sport remarked.

"The idee is, I s'pose, to find out what the new-comer wants in the camp?" Bowers observed, rising.

"Yes, that is it."

"Well, I'm off, solong! I'm much obliged for this leetle stake, and you kin bet yer pile I will do as much for you some time!"

"Oh, that is all right; good-luck!" the sport exclaimed as Joe Bowers departed.

CHAPTER IV.

A POOR PROSPECT.

THE hotel was the largest building in the town and Joe Bowers had no difficulty in finding it.

Like the majority of hotels in camp of this sort it was more saloon than hotel.

The landlord, Big John Valentine, was a muscular, broad-shouldered man of fifty or thereabouts, and after the veteran got a look at him he soon saw how appropriate was his nickname.

"I reckon that you are the mayor of this hyer town," Joe Bowers remarked.

"Yes, I reckon I am," the big man replied, scrutinizing the new-comer closely.

"I have just arrived in this hyer burgh and as I was told that it was the custom hyer fer all strangers to call on the mayor, I have sailed in to see you," Joe Bowers explained.

"Yes, that is a fact, but who told you so?"

"Keen Billy."

"Oh, are you a friend of his?"

"Nary time! I never saw the sport until I happened to run up ag'in him jest arter I got inter the town."

"How did you happen to come up this way? Been in any trouble?"

Now Joe Bowers was a keen old customer, and as he had been posted in regard to the antecedents of the majority of the men in the camp, it occurred to him that if he should declare he had not been in a difficulty the fact of his coming to the camp might appear singular, and so he made up his mind to admit that he was as big a rascal as any of the townsmen.

"Well, nothing to speak of," he replied with an air of unconcern. "There was a leetle trouble with some unreasonable men in regard to the ownership of a hoss which I found up on the Missouri, but it did not amount to much. In such a case when I see that the gents are going to get angry I allers make it a rule to slide out. I ain't the kind of a galoot, you know, to have trouble with no man 'bout any trifling no-account hoss."

"Possibly there was some talk of making you a present of a hempen neck-tie," the other remarked with a grim smile.

"Yes, I reckon I did hear some sich talk, but as I am terrible bashful 'bout sich things I jest lit out, and didn't give them no chance, if they calculated anything of the kind."

"What do you reckon to do hyer?"

"Oh, I ain't particular—anything I kin bitch onto. I am an old Pacific Sloper and I reckon I kin do as well in the gulches with a pan as any man you kin scare up in the camp."

The landlord shook his head.

"Well, now, stranger, I will give it to you as

straight as a string!" the mayor declared. "Thar's a mighty small show for you to make a living at that kind of business. I don't believe that thar's a bit of promising country within twenty miles of the camp that the boys hain't been over ag'in and ag'in. The fact is the thing is overdone. Thar are a few parties, who have had the luck to hit on good bits of ground, who are doing fairly—making a living, you know, but not much more, and unless you have got the rocks to buy a share in one of these claims I reckon you will not stand much chance."

"Oh, that is the old cry!" Joe Bowers remarked, with a knowing nod. "I don't think I ever struck a camp yet where I didn't hear jest sich a yarn spun, but, me noble lord, sich tales as that don't skeer me for a cent; I am an old-timer, I am, and what I don't know 'bout smelling out gold ain't worth knowing. Don't you be afeared but what I will do as well as the rest, and if I can't ketch as much gold as some of the other fellows in the daytime, I will make up for it when I git 'em at a card-table at night."

The landlord laughed.

"Ah, you are a sport, eh?"

"Well, I ginerally manage to hold my end up," Joe Bowers responded, with a grin.

"Then you do not care to buy a share in a claim?"

"I reckon I ain't got ducats enough to do that," the veteran replied. "You see, when I left I came away in sich a hurry that I didn't have time to call on my banker and git my stamps."

"You are not as well-beeled, then, financially speaking, as you might be?"

"I reckon I ain't. I am not clear down to the bed-rock, for I've got enough to keep me for a week or two, and if I can't strike something in that time it will be mighty funny."

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if you got along all right, for I reckon you know the ropes," the other responded.

"You can jest bet I do!" Joe Bowers replied, confidently.

"Say, you seem to be a jolly kind of fellow and I don't mind doing what I can to help you along," the landlord remarked. "Have you secured any roosting place yet?"

"No, I haven't had time; I have jest struck the town, you know."

"You want a cheap place, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I ain't a-putting up at any palace hotels jest now."

"Well, I will tell you what I will do. Do you see that shanty thar?" and the landlord pointed to a small building which looked as if it had been built for a horse-stall. "I fixed that up before I got my corral built; 'tisin't used now, and you kin have it to bunk in, for two or three days until you have a chance to turn 'round."

"High and mighty satrap, you are a trump, and no mistake!" Joe Bowers exclaimed, much to the astonishment of the other.

"Don't mind these leetle outbursts of mine. I'm a kind of a genius, and I am often taken in this way," the veteran explained. "And now, I say, do you s'pose there is any well-beeled galoot in the town who would be willing to grub-stake me for a share of what gold I may discover?"

The other shook his head.

"I don't believe that there is, but you might try the Jew storekeeper over yonder, Moses Cohen. But the fact is just as I have told you; all the ground in the neighborhood of the camp has been worked over so thoroughly that no one is willing to risk anything on the chance that any new leads kin be struck."

"I'll try the gentle Jew, although I reckon the odds are big that I will not be able to do anything with him, for these sons of Abraham never go into a game without they have all the advantage on their side. Much obliged for your kindness, Mister Mayor!" And then, with a stately bow, Joe Bowers departed.

He proceeded across the street to the store of the Jew.

It was the only shop in the camp, and contained a most miscellaneous collection of goods.

The owner of the establishment, a fat, jolly-looking, red-headed, red-bearded Jew, came forward, rubbing his hands together unctuously, to wait upon the supposed customer, but when Joe Bowers explained his business, the Hebrew, with many gesticulations and emphatic shrugs of the shoulders, protested that he could not think of going into any scheme of the kind.

"My dear fr'ent, you vill only waste your time!" he declared.

The veteran was too old a stager not to understand that it would be useless to attempt to persuade the Jew to change his mind, so he remarked:

"Of course, as I am a stranger in these hyer parts, I don't know exactly how the land lays and what the outlook is, but I reckoned as some strikes had been made, there was a chance that more might be hit."

But the Jew talked just the same as the landlord; there was no chance.

"I will not put any cash in any tools, then, until I take a tramp and see what the country looks like with my own peepers," the veteran announced.

So he invested in some crackers and cheese, and a pint flask of whisky, then sallied forth.

He turned into the first gulch he came to and followed it up.

As it happened, it was the one in which the best strikes in the neighborhood of the town had been made, and as he passed the various claims, the veteran stopped and conversed with the miners.

All told the same story; a man could make a living, but not much more; all were anxious to sell out, and were firm in the belief that all the big strikes that would ever be made in the neighborhood of Ricaree City had already occurred.

"I reckon I stand a heap sight better chance at poker than I do at mining," was Joe Bowers's comment, as he sought a secluded nook where he eat his lunch, drank his whisky and slept until the shades of night came on.

Then he made his way back to the camp; was lucky enough about nine o'clock to strike a "little game," and he went in to improve the opportunity for all it was worth.

The veteran was an excellent player, and although the game was limited to small stakes, yet as luck ran his way, when midnight came the adventurer had managed to win ten dollars.

"Well, I reckon I can manage to live in this hyer camp for a while, even if I can't strike any dirt," he soliloquised, as he made his way to the shanty where he was to pass the night. There was a heap of hay in one corner, and in ten minutes the veteran was fast asleep.

CHAPTER V.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

JOE BOWERS slept as sleeps the man whose conscience is clear and whose mind is easy.

For a good two hours the veteran tarried in the land of Nod, and then he was rudely awakened from his slumbers by a rough hand grasping him by the shoulder.

"Hullo, wake up!" cried a harsh voice.

Joe Bowers had been through too many adventures to be astonished at a little thing like this, and he immediately rose to a sitting posture, rubbed his eyes and looked around.

What he beheld was not reassuring.

There were three men in the place, all robed in long, black gowns, which extended from their necks to their heels, so that it was impossible to see what they had on underneath.

Over their heads were drawn comical black hoods, through holes in which their eyes gleamed.

Each man had a cocked revolver in his hand, and the polished barrels glistened ominously in the rays of light reflected from a lantern which was suspended on a nail in the side wall.

This was a complete surprise, of course, and although Joe Bowers did not manifest any particular alarm, merely staring at his unexpected visitors, yet in his heart he was completely disgusted at the idea that he should be treated to a surprise-party of this kind on the first night of his sojourn in the town.

"Do not attempt to give any alarm, or else your blood will be on your head!" cried the masked man who had gripped the veteran by the shoulder, and to give due effect to his words, the speaker pressed the cold muzzle of the revolver against Joe Bowers's head.

"Hold on! don't do that!" exclaimed the veteran, in alarm. "Take that durned gun away from my noddle! Yer blamed finger might slip, and then where would I be?"

"In a fit condition for planting, I reckon!" replied the disguised man with a hoarse laugh.

"Yes, but I ain't anxious to have anything of that kind happen," Joe Bowers protested. "This ain't the season for planting seeds like I am."

"Be careful, then, not to try any monkey business," the other warned.

"Monkey business! what do you take me for?" the veteran exclaimed in an indignant way. "Do you s'pose that I am a blamed tenderfoot? No, sir-ee! I will have you to know that I am an old hand, and I have sense enough to know that when I am held up in a workman-like manner, the best thing to do is to grin and bear it."

"I am glad to see that you have the right idea about the matter," remarked the taller man of the two who stood in the center of the apartment, and who from the tone of authority in which he spoke Joe Bowers conjectured to be the leader of the three.

"Oh, yes, I am jest chockfull of sense!" the veteran declared. "You kin tap me any where and draw out wisdom by the gallon!"

"Whisky more likely," the masked leader declared.

"Mebbe that is so," Joe Bowers remarked. "I reckon I will have to admit that I have punished my share of bug-juice, and a long-headed galoot suggested since I struck this hyer camp that I ought to be called Old Benzine, and I ain't sart'in that he isn't right."

"Do you know who we are?" the chief of the three demanded.

"I reckon that you are tax-gatherers," Joe Bowers replied, promptly. "But I say, boys, you ought to go light on me, for I have had an awful bad run of luck lately."

"Oh, we will treat you right; don't you worry about that," the masked man replied.

"Well, it does me proud to hear you say so, for I reckon no man ever struck this valley much worse fixed than I was when I hoofed it inter the camp," Joe Bowers remarked. "Some gay and festive cusses on the road, jest outside of White Sulphur Springs, everlastingly went for me—took my hoss, all my cash and stripped me right to the naked buff, jest a-giving me these hyer rags."

"If thar were any corn farmers up in this valley you would do right well to hire out for a scare-crow," the third one of the masked men suggested.

"I reckon I could fill the bill in that line," the veteran admitted.

"Well, now, we will come down to business," the chief remarked. "We three are known as the Black Caps of Ricaree, and it is our business to interview all strangers who come into this hyer valley."

"I'm proud to make yer acquaintance, gents, and I am yer servant to command," Joe Bowers declared. "And as I said afore, boys, for mercy sake go light on me!"

"How are you fixed?" the outlaw chief asked.

"Well, I have got jest about money enuff to sw'ar by, and that's all," Bowers replied, with a rueful face. "I war in a leetle poker game, and contrived to pick up a few ducats."

"Oh, yes, we know that—we know all about what you have done since you struck the town!" the masked leader declared. "We make it a point to keep our eyes on all strangers until we get a chance to interview them."

"You run the thing right up to the handle, don't you?" the veteran exclaimed, in accents of admiration.

"We calculate to play the game for all it is worth," the chief replied.

"I am pretty badly off, jest now," the veteran remarked. "But from the way I started in to-night, I reckon that if you had postponed this visit for a week or two, that it would have been money in your pocket."

"That may be, but we do not do business in that way," the unknown replied. "Our rule is to call upon all strangers as soon as we can—to visit them the first night they stop in the camp, if it is possible to arrange the matter—and we usually tax them one-half of what loose change they may have in their pockets. This little tax gives them the freedom of the valley, and we never trouble them after that."

"Yes, I see. Well, now, that is quite a scheme, I must say."

"And then we make it a point to examine them in regard to the nature of the business which brings them to this camp," the masked leader explained.

A look of surprise appeared on Joe Bowers's fat face.

"You are something more than ordinary tax-gatherers, I reckon," he exclaimed.

"Yes, you might set us down as being the guardians of this hyer valley of Ricaree, for we make it our business to see that no undesirable men come into it."

"Ye-yes," the veteran said slowly, as if he did not know exactly what to make of this statement.

"Now, you have told a good, straightforward story," the chief continued. "And if it is the truth we haven't any objections to your taking up your quarters in this camp, but before that point can be settled, the first thing to do is to find out whether your yarn is true or not."

"Hope I may die if it ain't!" replied the veteran promptly.

"Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy land," observed the masked man, sententiously.

"I suppose you know that there are some men up in this valley who were unlucky enough to get into trouble before they settled hyer, and, in fact, one of the reasons why they have come up into this region is to get rid of sheriffs and vermin of that kind."

"Well, I ain't been hyer long enuff to be very well posted, but most camps like this one ginerally have some men in 'em who ain't anxious to git within shaking-hands distance of the officers of the law," the veteran observed with a grin.

"Sheriffs who know this camp understand that we Ricaree men have never allowed any of our citizens to be taken out of the valley by force, but on a few occasions some smart Alecks have thought that they could sneak into this town in disguise and lay low until they got a chance to corral their man."

"A very mean, low-down, no-account game!" Joe Bowers declared, in indignant accents.

"And you ain't the man to try a thing of that kind, are you?" the masked chief inquired in a sarcastic way.

"No, sir-ee!" the veteran responded promptly.

"We are safe in betting on that, eh?" the other demanded.

"Yes, sir; you can put out all the ducats you kin rake together, and you would win, every time!" Joe Bowers declared, in the most emphatic way.

"I hope that you are telling the truth, for it is mighty unpleasant for us to have to put the

screws on a man when we find that he is lying about the matter!" the masked chief remarked in a menacing way.

"Yes, I reckon so, but you have to do such things once in awhile, I s'pose," the veteran remarked, evidently not greatly disturbed by the threat.

"We will talk right plainly to you now, and you want to think this matter over carefully and not make any mistakes, for it will cost you mighty dearly if you do," the disguised man warned.

"Don't you be afraid! I know the run of the game jest as well as though I had put up the cards myself!" Joe Bowers assented.

"If you have come up into this valley to play any little trick on any man in the camp, the best thing for you to do is to make a clean breast of it, and then to-morrow you can quietly get out and no one will be the wiser; but if you persist in your yarn that you haven't come here on any secret business of this kind, and we find out that you are lying, you will be killed as quickly as though you were a mad-dog!" the masked chief declared, sternly.

"Pard, I'm honest—the clear white article, and no mistake!" Joe Bowers protested.

"Well, I hope so, but we will soon find out, for we calculate to search you," the disguised leader, remarked. "And if we find any evidence in your clothes that you are not straight we will go for you in a way you will despise."

"Go ahead! you can't skeer me!" the veteran declared.

"We will strip you clean to the buff, and if you have any papers hid in the lining of your clothes you can bet your boots that we will shell 'em out!"

"Sail in as soon as you like! Any papers that you find I will be willing to eat, and I ain't hungry now either!" Joe Bowers exclaimed.

"In the first place fork over your cash!" the masked chief demanded.

The veteran put his hand into his pocket, fished out a handful of silver, two or three dollars' worth, and then gave a bowl of anger and dismay.

"What is the matter?" cried the spokesman.

"Some galoot has been through my pocket and touched me for my roll!" Joe Bowers exclaimed.

The masked men laughed, for this circumstance struck them as being extremely funny.

"Maybe you have put it in some other pocket," the chief suggested.

"No, I didn't! I remember putting all the cash together in this hyer one jest as well as can be!" Joe Bowers declared. "Arter we got through the game one of the boys suggested that I ought to stand treat, seeing as how I had come out a winner."

"Well, that was all right," the other observed.

"I know it; I ain't saying anything ag'in' it!" the veteran declared. "I was agreeable, of course."

"I asked them to all waltz up to the bar and I paid for the bug-juice like a man, and as I had been h'isting considerable benzine, I was fool enuff to pull out my roll—jest a little bit of brag, you know, so as to let the gang see that I was well-fixed, and some durned cuss was smart enuff to git away with the stuff arter I put the money back in my pocket. I noticed at the time that some of the gang were inclined to be durned familiar, slapping me on the shoulders, punching me in the ribs, and saying that I was one the best men that had struck this hyer camp for a dog's age, and while this funny business was going on, some galoot took advantage of it to go through me!"

Again the masked men laughed; the rage and disgust of the veteran bummer appeared to be very comical to them.

"Oh, you kin haw, haw! all you like!" Bowers cried. "It may seem durned funny to you, but if you were a-standing in my shoes, I reckon it would take you some time to see where the laugh comes in."

"Oh, well, we are out, too, if you come to that," the chief of the masked men observed.

"If you haven't got the money we cannot take our whack out of it."

"Yes, that is so; I never thought of that," the veteran admitted.

"You see that we are in the same boat," the other continued. "This paltry two or three dollars don't amount to anything! I should be ashamed to take a whack out of that, so we will have to present you the freedom of the town free, gratis, for nothing!"

"Well, I'm 'tarnally obliged, but when I make a raise I will whack up if you will arrange it so I kin pony up the money when I git my claws on it."

"Oh, that is all right; you need not trouble yourself. We only collect tax on what a man brings into the camp, and as you haven't got anything we will let you run."

"Much obliged! this hyer treatment shows that you want to do the squar' thing," Joe Bowers declared.

"Search him, boys!" the chief commanded.

"Sail in your elephants! I'm yer antelope! You will find that I am all white, and a yard wide!" the veteran declared.

And search him the masked men did in the

most thorough manner, examining his clothes so that not a square inch escaped their scrutiny.

It was evident from the way they went about the work that they suspected he had some papers concealed about his clothes, but they soon satisfied themselves that this was not the case.

"Didn't I tell yer that I was all squar?" Joe Bowers demanded in triumph as he dressed himself after the search was completed.

"Yes, but this is a mighty uncertain world, and it isn't always safe to believe what every man says," the masked chief replied.

"Well, I reckon that you are satisfied now that I am giving it to you straight?"

"Oh, yes, we will pass you. We will not trouble you again, and, hark ye! Just keep your tongue between your teeth in regard to this little visit of ours," the chief warned. "It will not do you any good to go round the camp blabbing about it."

"Don't you be afeard 'bout that!" Joe Bowers exclaimed. "I am not one of the kind who goes around town telling all I know."

"Well, I reckon that your head is screwed on all right, and as long as you mind your own business you need not be afraid of getting into any trouble in this camp," the other responded.

"I s'pose I kin go to roost ag'in?" the veteran remarked.

"Yes, turn in as soon as you like."

"Sorry that you didn't get the chance to corral some wealth, but leetle slip-ups of this kind will happen, no matter how keerfully you run the game," Joe Bowers observed, with the air of a philosopher as he laid down again upon the hay.

"So-long!" responded the masked chief, and then, taking the lantern with them, the three departed.

Joe Bowers waited until he was satisfied that the intruders were gone for good and then he chuckled softly to himself:

"Now see how it profits a man to have a head on his shoulders," he murmured. "I had a notion that some ornery galoots might take into their noddles to go through me to-night, and so I hid my roll; if I hadn't, these hyer Black Caps, as they call themselves, would have got away with the biggest part of it!"

And so, chuckling over the cunning he had displayed, the veteran fell asleep again.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BELLE OF RICAREE.

It was a bright, beautiful morning, and over the prairie sward, a couple of miles from the camp of Ricaree City, rode a handsome, dashy-looking girl, mounted on a cream-colored pony.

She had dark hair and eyes, regular features, finely-cut, whereon shone the bloom of health, and a beautifully proportioned figure.

This was Blanche Valentine, daughter of the keeper of the hotel, and by far the handsomest girl in the camp.

She was universally known as "the Belle of Ricaree."

Attracted by some clumps of wild flowers she turned aside from the main prairie and rode into a broad gulch which ran up into the foothills of the mountain range.

This gulch was about a quarter of a mile wide, and was thickly interspersed with little clumps of timber.

In her search for wild flowers the girl rode well into the gulch, and upon coming to where the blooms grew thickly she dismounted so as to pluck them.

Hardly had her feet touched the ground when out from a clump of timber came a snarling mountain lion, which had been disturbed in his lair by the approach of the new-comers.

It was a full-grown beast, and as ugly a one as any hunter would care to meet.

The moment it made its appearance the pony caught sight of it, and with a wild neigh of alarm the steed broke away from the grasp of its mistress and fled at the top of its speed.

The flight of the horse left the girl completely helpless, for her revolver was in the holster of the saddle and so had been carried away by the pony.

She had no better weapon than a penknife with which to defend herself, but notwithstanding her peril she did not give way to despair, and although the color had fled from her cheeks, yet she faced the beast with undaunted mien, drew the little knife from her pocket, and, opening it, prepared to struggle bravely for her life.

The huge cat was only some thirty feet away and was evidently puzzled at being thus boldly confronted.

If the girl had attempted to run there is no doubt that the beast would have immediately advanced to the attack, and, undoubtedly, have overtaken her before she could have got ten feet away, but caution is one of the prominent characteristics of all the beasts of the cat tribe from the lion downward, and the fact that the human faced him made the brute pause.

He crouched low upon the ground, his tail waving angrily to and fro.

"Merciful Father take me into your holy keeping in this dreadful hour of peril!" the girl

murmured with lips from whence all the blood seemed to have fled.

Then, all of a sudden, the sharp crack of a rifle rung out on the mountain air.

The mountain lion gave one mighty leap upward, clawed with his outstretched paws at the air, and then came down within a couple of yards of the astonished Blanche, writhing in the agonies of death.

A moment the girl gazed upon the great beast, gasping in its last pangs, and then, her strength suddenly deserting her, she fell upon her knees, as weak and helpless as a child.

Out from a covert on the hillside came the man who had fired the timely shot.

It was the sharp, Keen Billy.

He hurried to the girl, thinking that she was going to faint, revulsion of feeling which had overcome her was not strong enough to reduce her into insensibility, and when the sport reached her side and casting the Winchester rifle, which had sent the death-dealing ball into the brain of the mountain king, into the hollow of his left arm, he assisted the girl to rise to her feet, then conducted her to a convenient boulder which jutted out of the earth at the foot of a stunted oak, affording a seat.

"Let me rest here for a moment," she said, as she sunk upon the rock and leaned back against the tree, her breath coming thick and hard. "I will be all right in a few moments."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly," the sport remarked. "This ugly brute must have given you quite a scare, although I hardly think that he would have dared to attack you, even if I had not come to your assistance, for your bold stand confused him, and there are very few of these big cats who care to attack their prey from the front. It is always their game to work a surprise if they can. They like to creep up and take their victims by a rear assault."

"If you had not fired as you did I should be a dead woman by this time," Blanche declared.

She was breathing more easily now, and the color was beginning to return to her cheeks, and lips.

"Well, he did look threatening, but, as a rule, they will not attack unless they can take their prey by surprise."

"In this case the beast had surely marked me for a victim and I can thank you for my life," the girl declared, a grateful look shining in her great, dark eyes.

"Oh, that is all right," the sharp replied carelessly. "I am glad to be able to be of service to you, and I do not doubt that you would have done as much for me if you had the chance."

"Yes, I would, indeed; but that doesn't alter the fact that I am indebted to you for my life, and I shall never be satisfied until I have a chance to repay the obligation!" Blanche declared, gazing upon the sport with eyes full of gratitude.

"Now, I beg that you will not say anything more about the matter," Keene replied. "It was just the chance of accident that enabled me to get the opportunity to lay this fellow out. I owe the whiskered rascal a grudge anyway, for now that I know he was in the neighborhood, I understand what frightened the antelopes away that I was lying in wait to get a shot at. I spied them some time ago feeding down through the foothills toward the gulch, and I immediately went into ambush so as to get a shot at them, but just as they were coming within range, they suddenly stopped eating and sniffed the air as though they had scented something which they did not like, then, after hesitating for a few moments, they bounded off up into the hills. That was about fifteen minutes ago. I held my position, for I had an idea that whatever it was that had disturbed them might come within range so I could get a crack, but this cat must have come down into the gulch in the shelter of the timber, for I did not see him until he sprung out at your approach."

"Oh, it is all very well for you to make light of the great service which you have rendered me, but I am not disposed to look at the matter in that way!" the girl declared. "When I think of the danger to which I was exposed—the deadly peril from which your rifle-shot saved me, I am filled with a feeling of devout thankfulness, and, as I said before, I shall never be satisfied until I am able to show you in some way how much I appreciate the service."

"All right; if you want to look at it in that way, I suppose it will not do any good for me to object. There is an old saying that a willful woman will have her own way, and it is my opinion that if a man is wise he will not attempt to interfere with her having it," the sharp remarked with a laugh.

"Ah, really, you must not think that I am willful because I feel as I do about this matter," the girl remarked, with a pretty pout of her rich, red lips.

Her color had all returned now, and as the sport gazed down upon her upturned face he thought that he had never looked upon a prettier girl, for the earnest expression which she now wore added measurably to her beauty.

"Of course, it is not gallant for me to say so, even if I think it," he responded with a light laugh.

"It is so odd too that the chance of accident

should have made you my preserver," she remarked, slowly, a thoughtful expression upon her face.

Keene seemed to be puzzled by this remark, for he looked inquiringly at the girl as he observed:

"You will excuse me, but I do not exactly see the force of that speech. Why is it odd that I should be lucky enough to be of service to you more than any one else?"

"Well, it seemed odd to me because I fancied that you do not like me."

A look of surprise appeared upon the face of the sport.

"How on earth did you get that idea in your head?" he exclaimed.

"But is it not the truth?"

"Indeed it is not!"

"Well, I am glad to hear you say so," and the girl smiled in the face of the sharp.

"But I do not understand how you could get such an idea!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, I think I have a good reason for it," Blanche replied, with a touch of coquetry in her manner. "Do you remember the dance that my father gave at the hotel about three weeks ago?"

"Yes, yes! that was just after my arrival in the camp," Keene replied. "I think I had only been in Ricaree City four days when that event took place."

"You attended the dance, for I saw you there, and there are so few strangers come to the camp that it is not possible for one to escape notice, particularly a gentleman like yourself so different from the average miner."

"Oh, yes, I was at the dance and enjoyed myself very much."

"It was the common belief among the ladies that you were the best dancer in the room!" the girl declared, an arch look upon her face.

"Really, I feel flattered," the sport replied with a bow. "I did not know the ladies had so good an opinion of me, but I believe I did contrive to get along as well as any man in the room. You see, when I was a youngster in the East I went to dancing school, and as I grew up in a little manufacturing town in New England, where there were plenty of factory hands, both male and female, and there were two or three dances a week all through winter, I had plenty of opportunities for practice."

"Yes, we girls all agreed that you were by far the best dancer present, and as the gentlemen pronounced me to be the best lady dancer, I suppose you can understand that I felt just a little vexed that you never asked me to dance with you once during the whole evening."

"Well, now, really, I believe you have got me in a corner," Keene remarked, smiling. "And I feel flattered to think that you noticed me at all."

"I thought that it was odd that you did not ask me to dance, and, considering the circumstances under which we have come together now, I do not mind making a candid confession that I kept three or four dances open on my list so I would be able to give some of them to you," Blanche said, a slight blush coloring her cheeks and forehead.

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, it is the truth!" the girl declared, getting a little confused under the earnest gaze of the sport. "Of course, I am acting a little foolishly in making such a confession, and if you had not saved my life I would not have done it. It is the old story though of pride having a fall. I thought I was as attractive as any girl in the room, so I never dreamed that you would not want to dance with me, and when the dance ended, without my being gratified, I did really feel vexed, I assure you, and the only reason I could assume was that you had taken a dislike to me. People do take odd likes and dislikes, you know, sometimes, and without reason."

"Oh, yes, that is the truth oftentimes, but it is not true in this case, I assure you," the sport replied. "And since confessions are in order I may as well make a clean breast of it and tell you why it was that I did not seek to dance with you."

"I do not mind admitting that I am extremely curious about the matter," the girl declared. "To be curious is one of the attributes of my sex, you know."

"Oh, yes, I know that is the common supposition, but whether it is correct or not is more than I should care to undertake to decide," Keene remarked. "But I will explain the matter."

And he sat down upon a rock, a yard from the one upon which Blanche was seated.

"I should like to have you, because I will admit that my foolish vanity was dreadfully wounded," the girl observed, frankly.

"A few words will enable you to understand all about it," the sport replied.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SPORT'S STORY.

KEENE hesitated for a few moments before he spoke, as though he was a little in doubt as to the best way to proceed.

"This is not going to be quite so easy a matter as I imagined," he said at last. "And I am afraid that I have made a rather rash promise."

"Why, I don't understand how that can be!"

the girl exclaimed in wonder. "But you need not speak, I will be satisfied with your assurance that it was not on account of any dislike you took to me that you neglected to ask me to dance."

"Oh, no, I will go ahead, for since the affair has made a bad impression on your mind it is better that you should know the facts in the case," Keene remarked.

"Just as you please, of course; I will not deny that I am curious to learn all about it, but if it is at all unpleasant for you to speak I would much rather you would not," Blanche observed, earnestly.

"I will explain, as long as I have become entangled in the subject," the sport replied. "All the trouble is that I am afraid I shall not be able to make a very good showing for myself, and when a man relates a yarn in which he is the center figure he generally tries to make himself out as big a hero as he can."

"Oh, yes, I can understand that, and is it not natural too?" the girl exclaimed.

"Well, don't judge me too harshly, and you shall have the plain, round, unvarnished truth," the sport declared.

"Although I have not the least idea of what your story is going to be, yet I am not afraid to declare in advance that I feel confident my judgment will be a favorable one."

"Listen and then decide. As I said before, at the time the dance was given I was a new-comer in the camp, and, like the most of the men who have located in this valley, I came here to avoid pursuit, being a fugitive from the law."

"Like a good many other young men in the East I fancied the old States were overcrowded and I came out to the boundless West to grow up with the country, but being a clerk and not a mechanic, I soon made the discovery that there wasn't any room in the West for me, big and boundless as it was."

"Necessity is the mother of invention! I could not find anything to do, yet had no inclination to starve, and then, just by accident, I made the discovery that I could turn my skill as a card-player to account."

"The harmless amusement in which I had been expert ever since my boyhood's days, suddenly developed into a trade by means of which I could live, and I must admit that my morality had got to so low an ebb that I did not hesitate in the least in taking up the life of a card-sharp."

"Yes, I fully understand how such a thing could be," Blanche remarked, thoughtfully. "I too came from the East, and I know how the men who gain their living playing cards are regarded there, but in the West here it is altogether different. Almost everybody seems to play cards and it is done openly, and few appear to see anything wrong in the practice."

"Oh, yes, a man can be a gambler out here, and yet be regarded as a decent member of society, so different from the East where he is regarded as a social outcast."

"Yes, it is strange."

"Well, in following the life of a sport there came a time when I became involved in a difficulty," Keene continued. "I do not think I was to blame, but in a case of this kind each man is apt to believe that he is in the right and his opponent in the wrong."

The girl nodded assent. She was following the story with the deepest interest.

"I believed at the time that it was either my opponent's life or mine—I believe so still, and consider that though I was the victor in the fight I was justified in defending myself."

"It is the unwritten law of the West!" the girl asserted. "I have been out here long enough to understand that."

"As it happened I was a new-comer—a stranger, in the town where the trouble happened, while my antagonist was an old resident with lots of relatives and troops of friends, so, although there was no allegation made that the fight was not conducted in the fairest and squarest manner, yet I was hunted like a wild beast, and even the officers of the law were pressed into service to run me down."

"It was downright persecution!" Blanche declared, indignantly.

"Well, considering the circumstances of the case I don't think that word is a bit too strong!" Keene declared.

"Under these conditions I came to Ricaree City. I had heard that this was a camp of refuge, and that no sheriff, or other officer, would be allowed to disturb any man who was lucky enough to gain the shelter of the town."

"Yes, I believe it is a boast of the men in the camp that no officer dares to attempt to make an arrest in the valley, no matter what the fugitive may have done," the girl observed, a troubled look upon her fair face.

"The reputation of the town was what induced me to turn my flying footsteps in this direction," Keene continued. "But even after I reached the camp and found that it was indeed a sanctuary of refuge, I did not feel perfectly secure, for there was the chance that private vengeance might overtake me, even if I was safe from the officers of the law."

"Yes, that is true—there was danger of that," Blanche remarked.

"I feared so, and therefore at the time that

the dance took place, only a few days after my arrival in the town, remember, I was apprehensive of danger—anxious to make friends who might aid me if I was attacked, and extremely desirous of not provoking enmity. You see I am speaking with extreme frankness, and showing you that I was calculating the chances as closely as the greatest coward that ever lived."

"Oh, no; I do not look at it in that light at all!" Blanche declared, immediately, "You were acting with caution, and because a man is cautious it is not to be said that he is not brave."

"Wait a little while and you may change your mind in regard to this one particular man whose story I am telling," the sport remarked, with a quiet smile.

"Ah, now you are trying to prejudice me in advance, and that is not strictly fair," the girl declared.

"All right! I will go on with my tale, and omit comments," Keene remarked.

"Things were in this condition with me when I went to the dance where I saw you for the first time. Now I am not trying to flatter you when I say that in my humble opinion there was not another lady in the room who could be compared with you at all."

"Oh, my goodness! if that isn't flattery, what do you call it?" Blanche exclaimed.

"The truth!" the sport replied, without a moment's hesitation.

"Well, I guess I had better keep quiet; you are altogether too quick for me," the girl observed, demurely.

"The first acquaintance I made in the town was Dave Ginger—Ginger Blue, as they all call him—and as he had a spare room in his cabin I took up my quarters with him, as he offered to board me until I should secure a place of my own, and with Ginger and his sister, Sally, I came to the dance."

"Yes, I noticed that you danced more with Sally Ginger than you did with any of the rest."

"Well, I couldn't very well help myself without being absolutely rude," the sport remarked with a grimace. "She gave me to understand that she was having a splendid time, and ascribed it all to the fact that she could dance so much better with me than she could with any of the rest."

"Well, Sally is not a bad kind of a girl, if she has red hair and a temper to match," Miss Valentine observed in a reflective way. "I have not anything against her, although I know very well that she does not like me. She was supposed to be the belle of the town before I came, and because the men pay me attention she doesn't like it. She is one of the jealous kind who cannot brook a rival near her throne."

"She did not say anything against you to me," the sport observed.

"Oh, no, she is a cunning girl!" Blanche declared with a scornful look. "One of the kind who is all smiles to your face, but never misses the chance to give you a sly dig in the back."

"Naturally I inquired of her who you were and she told me all about you. At the time you were in the company of this rancher, Gilbert Featherstone, the Cowboy Dude, as they call him."

"Yes, I remember."

"Miss Ginger told me all the particulars in regard to Featherstone and yourself," the sport continued.

Blanche looked astonished.

"All the particulars in regard to him and myself?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"I do not understand what there was to tell." It was now Keene's turn to look surprised.

"Why, are you not engaged to be married to Mr. Featherstone?"

"Indeed I am not!" the girl declared, a bright blush covering her face.

"Well, that is strange! I am surprised to hear you say that, for it is the general opinion that such is the fact."

"I do not understand it at all!" Blanche declared, quite indignantly. "There is no foundation at all for the report, excepting that he is a great friend of my father, so comes often to the hotel, and has paid me a great deal of attention; but there is no engagement between us, and if he and my father were not such friends, I would not be seen with him as much as I am; but my father is under great obligations to Mr. Featherstone. It was his money that started my father in business here, and he really owns the hotel and all within it, and so, for my father's sake, I force myself to be polite to the man, although there is something about him that I do not like at all."

"Oho! this is an entirely different story to the one that Miss Sally told me!" the sport declared.

"Well, people will talk, and the gossips here in this little camp are every bit as bad as in the Eastern villages," Miss Valentine declared, evidently very much annoyed.

"Her story was that you and the Cowboy Dude were very much in love with each other, and he was so jealous that he could not bear to see you speak to any other man."

"What a ridiculous idea," the girl declared, her face again flaming scarlet.

"She related two or three stories of how the Cowboy Dude had continued to pick quarrels with men who had presumed to pay you attention, Keene remarked. "And I, having no reason to suppose that the tales were not true, made up my mind that it would be just as well for me if I steered clear of giving Featherstone any chance to cause me trouble, and that is where I acted so prudently as to give rise to the suspicion that I was not as brave as I might be."

"Oh, no, I do not see that that conclusion follows at all," the girl declared. "You were in this valley under peculiar circumstances, and it would have been very foolish indeed for you to have acted in such a way as to make an enemy of a man like Gilbert Featherstone, for he, with his cowboys, would be a dangerous enemy, indeed."

"That was the way I calculated at the time," Keene remarked. "I was a stranger and wanted to be certain of my ground before I proceeded. So, on the night of the dance I did not seek to make your acquaintance, nor have I sought to since that time, for as I believed that you were promised to another man, I would not feel like paying you attentions, even if I was impressed with the belief that there wasn't another girl in the camp who could compare with you."

"That is a very delicate bit of flattery indeed!" Blanche exclaimed with a charming smile. "But now that you know the truth I hope you will not allow this Cowboy Dude to frighten you away."

"Oh, no! I am no longer a stranger in the camp, and I have no more fear of Featherstone than I have of any other man, notwithstanding his cowboys!" the sport declared. "I prize your friendship and you may rest assured I appreciate the favor that fortune has given me. But you must not let your gratitude run away with you." And Keene's voice and manner became sober. "You must bear in mind what I am—a card-sharp with the stain of blood upon my hands—a man who has been hunted like a wolf!"

"Yes, hunted by a set of merciless cowards, no one of whom would dare to face you singly!" the girl declared with fiery indignation. "If you had a fair trial no doubt you would go free."

"Well, yes, I think I would, for I most surely acted strictly in self-defense, and did not strike until my life was assailed."

"People who live in glass houses mustn't throw stones," the girl said, rising, and the sharp followed her example. "If you knew the history of my father you would not think that I condescended in being glad of your friendship. But come! help me catch my horse so I can return to the camp."

This task was soon performed, for the pony was grazing down the gulch, then, with a warm clasp of hands, the two parted.

Blanche rode toward the town while Keene proceeded to strip the skin from the mountain lion.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STORMY INTERVIEW.

WHILE the sport was occupied in this task, his mind was full of the beautiful girl who, it was plainly evident, had taken a most decided fancy to him.

"Gratitude is akin to love, they say," he murmured, "and in this case it surely seems to be so. There isn't much doubt that I saved the girl's life, for this ugly beast certainly would have made mince-meat out of her if my rifle-ball had not laid him low."

"She is a beautiful girl, and seems to be as good as she is beautiful, and as there seems to be a chance for me, why should I not improve it?"

"I am nothing but a card-sharp now, it is true, but I have saved a little money, enough to start me in some decent business, and if I am lucky enough to win the girl, I can find plenty of places down in the Southwest where there will not be one chance in a million of my enemies finding me until I have made a name and position so that I will be able to fight them successfully. I would be a fool indeed if I did not seek to improve this favorable chance which fortune has thrown in my way."

"Comforted and stimulated by this girl's love, there is an opportunity to build up a new life—to become another kind of a man entirely, and I will be hanged if I don't go in for it!"

The sport's reflections were interrupted at this point. He happened, just by accident, to glance up the gulch, and caught sight of two men advancing toward him.

He recognized the pair immediately, and a low whistle indicative of astonishment escaped from his lips.

The Cowboy Dude and his right-hand man, Black Tom Murphy, by all that is wonderful!" he exclaimed.

Both of them had shot-guns, and it looked as if they had been on a shooting excursion.

"Now, I think I would be safe in betting big odds that they saw me in conversation with the girl, for it has only been a minute or two since she left, and they must have been within sight at the time."

"Maybe there is going to be a little trouble, so it will be well for me to be prepared. There is nothing like going into a fight with a good ready on."

Then he bent over the dead beast again, turning around sideways so as to conceal his motions and raised the hammer of both his revolvers.

"Now, then, if there is going to be music in the air I will be ready to start in at the first toot of the trumpet," he observed.

Though apparently busy with his task of skinning the mountain lion yet the sport kept a wary eye upon the approaching men.

"In my opinion there is neither one of them too good to take a snap-shot at me when they thought I was off my guard," the sport muttered.

But it was not Keene's game though to allow the others to suspect that he thought they had come to make trouble, and so when they got within fifty feet he stood up and nodded to them in the most friendly manner.

The pair returned the salutation in such a way that it was plain to the sport they did not feel in a good humor toward him.

"I reckon that there is going to be trouble," Keene muttered, "and maybe it is lucky that I am all ready for it."

"Big game!" the Cowboy Dude remarked as he came to a halt a yard or two from the body of the beast.

"Yes, I did not reckon to get anything of this sort when I started out," the sport replied. "I was after antelopes."

"And you was not particular, I suppose, if you ran across any other kind of a deer?" Black Tom Murphy exclaimed with a hoarse laugh.

The sport pretended not to understand the insinuation.

"Oh, well, when a man is out on a hunting trip he must be content with whatever game fortune sends him," Keene replied.

"That was Miss Valentine you were talking with—wasn't it?" the rancher demanded in a rather ugly way.

"Yes, it was," Keene replied, quietly, but there was a dangerous glitter in his dark eyes.

"I suppose she was admiring your skill as a hunter?" the Cowboy Dude remarked with a sneer.

"Well, she had good reason to admire it," the sport replied.

"How so?" the rancher inquired.

"Why, she was corraled by this cat, and if I had not happened to be in the neighborhood the chances are that the beast would have made a meal of her."

The rancher and his man looked at each other in surprise, this statement being entirely unexpected.

"Is that so?" the Cowboy Dude observed, slowly.

"Oh, yes! I am giving it to you straight," the sport declared.

He did not hesitate to allow the fact to become known, for he felt sure that the girl would tell the story of her rescue as soon as she got to the camp, and there was no use of his attempting to keep the matter secret.

"Wal, that is a big feather in your cap, now, I reckon!" Black Tom Murphy exclaimed. "You kin sport 'round the camp now as a hero."

"Oh, well, I don't know about that," Keene replied, carelessly. "I don't know as it is a big thing for a man to kill one of these brutes, particularly when he gets a good, fair chance to knock one over, as I did, without running any risk."

"I do not doubt that the girl thinks that you are a hero!" the Cowboy Dude exclaimed, with a decided sneer. "And I must say that I am sorry the thing occurred as it did."

The sport affected to be astonished at this declaration.

"Well, now, I do not understand that!" he exclaimed. "I don't see what possible difference it can make to you."

"The only thing about the affair is that this accident may impress Miss Valentine with the idea that you have a sort of claim on her gratitude, and as she is a very sweet-tempered girl, always anxious to do what is right, this thing may annoy her a little," the rancher said.

"I do not see how that can be, and even if it is so, what is it to you, anyway?" the sport asked.

"The lady is going to be my wife!" the Cowboy Dude exclaimed, haughtily.

"Oh, is she?" Keene asked, in his cool way.

"Yes, sir, she is!"

"That reminds me of a story," the sport observed, in a reflective way.

"A story!" exclaimed Featherstone, while Black Tom Murphy stared in surprise.

"Yes, and it seems to me to fit nicely into this case."

"Well, I don't see how that is," the rancher observed.

"Listen to the yarn: there was once a Widow Green, a very smart, middle-aged woman noted for her business ability, with a ten year old boy, for whom she was anxious to get another father, and one day she said to the little fellow: 'My son, as you are old enough to understand, I suppose I may as well tell you that I am going to

be married to Doctor Jones.' 'Bully for you, mother!' the boy cried. 'Does the doctor know it?'"

The face of the Cowboy Dude grew black as a thundercloud, while Black Tom Murphy could not help grinning, having all the average Westerner's appreciation for a good story.

"I don't see what this yarn of yours has got to do with my engagement to marry Miss Valentine!" Featherstone exclaimed, roughly.

"Why, it is like a patent medicine, the merit lies in the application!" Keene replied, with a scornful smile on his bold and handsome features.

"You say that you are going to marry Miss Valentine, and like the boy I cry, bully for you! does the young lady know it?"

The rancher could restrain his wrath no longer.

"You miserable gambler! do you dare to doubt my word?" he cried, bringing his gun to a present, with his hand on the trigger, a movement which Murphy immediately imitated.

Keene had his revolver out in a flash and "covered" both men.

"Go slow!" he continued, "don't attempt to drop the muzzle of those guns an inch lower or I will bore a hole apiece in the pair of you!"

It did not take the Cowboy Dude and Black Tom Murphy many seconds to discover that all the advantages of the situation were with the sport.

Before they could bring their guns to the level so as to be able to fire at him, he could certainly discharge half a dozen shots, and the chances were a thousand to one that the first two balls that left the muzzles of his revolvers would be certain to put them in such a condition that they would not feel inclined to do any more fighting.

The sharp had "got the drop" on them.

Only a moment did the two hesitate, and then the Cowboy Dude threw his gun again into the hollow of his arm, and Black Tom Murphy followed his example.

"Maybe I am a little hasty in this matter," the rancher observed, sulkily.

"Oh, yes, there isn't any doubt of it," the sharp responded, in a pleasant way, just as if this little performance that they were going through was a commonplace, every-day affair, and, as he spoke, he returned his pistols to their holsters.

"It is natural for a man to become angry when his word is doubted!" the rancher exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I can understand that," Keene replied. "But have you not made some mistake about the matter? Does Miss Valentine understand that she is engaged to be married to you? I should judge that she did not, for during the brief conversation that we held together she certainly gave me to understand that she was not engaged to any one."

"Perhaps you think that there is a chance for you!" Featherstone exclaimed, savagely.

"Well, if the lady is free to choose I don't see why I shouldn't stand as good a chance as any man!" the sport declared.

"She is going to be my wife!" the rancher declared. "It is all arranged. Her father and I have settled the affair, and if you interfere you certainly will get yourself into trouble."

"Oh, you have settled it with her father," Keene remarked, in a reflective way, as though he was meditating over the affair. "Well, that may be your way of doing business, but it is not mine. I should secure the girl's consent before I bothered with the old man; it isn't the father that you are going to marry, you know!"

The Cowboy Dude was greatly irritated by this reply and from the look that came over his face it seemed as if he meditated making an attack upon the frank speaker, but, upon reflection, he thought better of it, for despite his anger, he had sense enough to comprehend that if he brought on a conflict now the chances were that he would get the worst of it, and as the rancher was a shrewd calculator, he was not the man to go into a fight when the chances were all against him.

"I have given you fair warning about this matter," he said. "And if you choose to cross my path you will have to take the consequences."

"Oh, that is all right. I am not the man to shirk responsibilities," the sharp replied.

"You have been warned!" the rancher declared, threateningly, and then he and Black Tom Murphy departed, going down the gulch toward the town.

Keene kept his eyes on the pair until they disappeared behind the swells of the rolling prairie, for he did not trust them.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE.

WHEN Keene became satisfied that the pair had indeed gone, he resumed his task of taking off the skin of the mountain lion.

"I do not take much stock in either of the pair," he soliloquized. "I may be mistaken in my surmise, but it is my impression that they are a couple of rascals, although I never heard of anything out of the way about them."

"I did not know but they might try the dodge of pretending to depart, and then sneak back for the purpose of getting a shot at me. If they had

gone up the gulch, where the broken and irregular country would have favored such a thing, I would have been pretty certain that that was the game they wanted to play, but as they went in the opposite direction, where it is all open, so there isn't any chance to try a trick of the kind, I reckon there isn't much doubt that they are gone for good."

In a few minutes he had the skin off, then he rolled it into a compact bundle and tied it up so it could be transported easily.

Just as he completed this job he heard a rustling in the bushes, fifty feet or so to the right, in the direction of the foot-hills.

Keene grasped his rifle, for the noise seemed to indicate that big game was coming.

"Hold on! don't shoot!" cried a hoarse voice as the sport drew the rifle up to his shoulder, and then into view came the burly figure of jovial bummer, Joe Bowers.

"Oh! it is you, is it?" Keene exclaimed.

"You kin bet yer bottom dollar on that and you will be safe to keno, every time!" the other announced as he advanced, a huge grin on his broad face.

The sport laughed; there was something about the fat stranger that he liked.

"Yes, sir-ee!" the veteran continued. "I am all hyer, large as life, and twice as natural."

"Well, this is quite a surprise-party!" the sharp observed. "How long have you been in this neighborhood?"

"Oh, I jest come a leetle while ago. I have been doing a leetle prospecting to see if I couldn't strike some pay-dirt up in this hyer gulch."

"What success?"

"Nary bit! Hain't struck 'color' once."

"That is bad; but, I say, do you generally prospect without tools?"

"Oh, I am heeled for business," and from the back of his belt he produced a three-pound mason's hammer. "This hyer tool will do the business jest as well as though I carted a bull kit around with me."

"Yes, I see."

"Say, you came near gitting into a little fuss with them cowboy chaps, didn't ye?" Bowers remarked.

"Oh, were you in the neighborhood at the time?" asked Keene in surprise.

"Yes, I was to the fore; you see, I came down the gulch right arter them."

And when the veteran made this announcement the suspicion suddenly flashed upon the sport that the bummer had been playing the spy upon the Cowboy Dude and Black Tom Murphy, although he could not for the life of him imagine why the man should want to do such a thing.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I was prospecting up the gulch when they passed, and I follered on down arter them; I wasn't twenty feet away from the galoots when they caught sight of you and the gal, but as I was a-roosting in a lot of bushes, where I had been taking a snooze, they didn't see me, and I had a chance to hear what they said."

"I imagine that this Featherstone was not pleased when he saw me talking with Miss Valentine," the sport observed.

"Pard, you are right there, for a thousand dollars," Joe Bowers declared.

"That is what I thought."

"Oh, you kin bet that he ripped and tore—he used cuss-words enough to shingle a barn, and he allowed that if you didn't keep away from that petticoat, he would have yer scalp for sure!"

"It is all right so far, though," Keene replied, with a laugh.

"You bet! You see you were too quick for him, and arter you got the drop on the pair, they knew too much to attempt to go on."

"Oh, I had them foul," the sport declared.

"That is so, you bet!" the bummer rejoined.

"And I tell you it jest joyed my soul to see you put it to 'em in the way you did. Yes, sir-ee! it was as much as I could do to keep from haw-hawing right out!"

"Well, you see, I saw them coming, and as I had an idea that they meant mischief, I was all prepared for them," Keene observed.

"Mighty satrap! you did the job up prime!" the veteran declared. "I reckored that the pair would try to pick a fuss with you, if they could git a chance to jump in and catch you off yer guard, and as I wasn't sure that you were all primed and loaded for 'em, I jest sneaked along so as to git within shooting-distance, reckoning, you know, to take a hand in the fun myself."

The sharp look surprised at this statement.

"Well, now, I am a little astonished to hear you say that, for I did not take you to be a warrior," Keene remarked.

"By hookey! you are 'bout right," Joe Bowers answered with a knowing grin. "I am one of the kind of men whose legs have been too well brought up to see the body abused, and when I conclude that there is a prospect of a row, I generally slide out as gracefully as possible."

"Well, without meaning any disrespect to you, that is the kind of man that I should take you to be," the sport observed.

"Yes, sir-ee! when you say that you hit me

plumb-center, every time!" the veteran declared. "And in this little fandango, although I calculated to take an active part, yet I did not reckon to show myself. I was snuggled down in the bushes out yonder, and it was my idee to take a crack at the first man of the pair who seemed likely to git the drop on you. Oh, I had my tool all ready; you kin bet high on that," and in proof of this the veteran drew from a hiding-place in the bosom of his parti-colored flannel shirt a revolver, navy size, and a skeleton iron frame so arranged as to be attached to the pistol, and thus transform it into a gun.

"When I struck this hyer camp, you know, I was stripped clean to the buff of everything 'cept these hyer old rags, and the man who travels in a country like this without being heeled with a good shooting-iron, is at a terrible disadvantage, now I will tell yer!" the veteran declared.

"Well, that is certainly correct," the sport remarked.

"You kin bet all the rocks you kin scare up in this world that it is!" Joe Bowers declared. "So, arter I made a leetle rifle in a poker game, which I was able to git into, thanks to the noble ducats which you gave me, me lord duke, I made a trade with Cohen, the Jew, and got this hyer pop-gun, and I must say that I don't think I ever had a weapon which suited me better. You see this here stock attachment is jest what I want. I am a tolerable good shot—that is, I used to be, but I have got so blamed nervous of late years—too much benzine h'isting, I reckon—that I can't depend on myself when it comes to pistol practice, but with this hyer leetle attachment I am a boss, I tell yer! I had the gun resting on a rock, and I would have everlastingly bored one of them cowboy chaps if I see'd that they were going to get the drop on you!"

"Well, I am very much obliged I am sure!" Keene declared. "I had no idea that I had a friend near at hand."

"Oh, it would have been a reg'lar surprise party!" the veteran declared. "And I am almost sorry that I didn't get the chance to drill one of 'em!"

"You see, pard, I am jest as I told you, all wool, a yard wide and you are safe to tie to me every time!" the bumner continued. "You picked me up, and put me on my legs when I was flat broke, though I was a stranger to you, and you kin bet yer bottom dollar that I am going in to help you every time I git the chance, and that is the kind of a hairpin I am!"

"Well, it is rather strange that you should come so near having an opportunity to be of assistance to me and so soon too," the sport observed, reflectively.

"Oh, that's a heap of truth in the words of the Gospel sharp, you know, 'bout, 'casting your bread upon the waters,'" the veteran observed; "I have seen that air thing come true more times than I have got fingers and toes!"

"Yes, I believe that there is a good deal of truth in it."

"But I say, pard, I want to ask your opinion 'bout a leetle picnic that I got into the first night that I slept in this hyer camp of Ricaree," Joe Bowers remarked. "And then he gave a full account of his adventure with the masked men."

As Keene listened to the tale a look of astonishment appeared upon his face.

"What do you think of it, high and mighty satrap?" Joe Bowers asked.

"Well, I don't understand it at all," the sport replied.

"Does this hyer gang hold up every man that comes into the town in the way they did me?"

"No, not to my knowledge! Most certainly they did not trouble me, and I never heard of anybody ever being troubled."

"Of course they warned me not to say anything, and I haven't, for I wanted time to look around and see how the old thing was working before I gave the snap away," Joe Bowers said.

"You acted prudently, for, under the circumstances, it was not possible for you to tell anything about the masked men, and if you had spoken to any one about the matter, the very party to whom you related the story might be one of the men who visited you," the sport remarked.

"That is just what I reckoned, and that was the reason that I held my tongue," the bumner replied with a satisfied chuckle. "Oh, I wasn't born yesterday!"

"No, I should imagine not, and you certainly look as if you had cut your eye-teeth!"

"Oh, I have! and a mighty long time ago! But I say, me royal lord, this hyer masked man business is a reg'lar puzzle to me."

"So it is to me."

"From the way they talk, you know, I got the idee that it was a reg'lar thing—that it was a put up job to interview every stranger who came to the camp so as to be able to find out just who and what he was," Joe Bowers explained.

"Well, that certainly seemed to be their object, but they certainly don't go for every man who comes into the camp in this way," Keene declared. "They did not trouble me nor did I ever hear of their interviewing anybody, for a thing of this kind would be sure to leak out if it was tried on many men, no matter how strong

the threats were that there would be trouble if the witness gave the thing away."

"Oh, yes, you are right about that, and no mistake!" the veteran declared. "'Tain't in human nature for the common run of men to keep their mouths closed 'bout a thing of this sort, 'ticularly if the masked galoots touched 'em for their wealth."

"Well, I never heard a word from any one in regard to being troubled!" the sport declared.

"Say, pard, it really looks as if this hyer thing was gotten up on purpose to go for me, don't it?" Joe Bowers said, reflectively.

"It does indeed."

"And the landlord galoot, this hyer big Johnnie Valentine, he war kind, wasn't he, in offering me the old stable to roost in, so as to save me from having to pay for a place somewhere?" the veteran questioned, a quizzical look upon his face.

"Well, I don't know about that," Keene replied, thoughtfully, "I don't want to say too much against Valentine, you know, for he is the father of this young lady, in whom I take a decided interest, and it would not be wise for me to incur the enmity of the old man; but I must say it seems to me that Valentine offered you the place so as to have you where the masked fellows would be able to get at you without any trouble."

Joe Bowers made a grimace and winked in a knowing way.

"I reckon that you are right 'bout his royal nibs!" the bumner declared. "That was his leetle game, and you can bet high on it; I did not fall into no trap, neither, for I suspected he was up to something of the kind when he made the offer. Mebbe you have heered the old yarn 'bout keeping yer eyes skinned for the Greeks bearing gifts?"

"Yes, I remember, although my classical knowledge is decidedly misty."

"Well, me lord duke, them ancient sharps knew a thing or two 'bout human nature, if they did live in the dark ages!" the veteran declared.

"Well, as far as that goes, human nature to-day is about the same as it was then," the sport observed.

"Oh, yes, that is so!" the other admitted; "I s'pose the old man thought he was playing me for a flat, but he never made a bigger mistake in his life. The moment he made the offer I smelt a mouse; I reckoned that he was gitting me into a trap, but I waltzed into it as though I had been the blamest fool that had ever trod in shoe-leather!"

"I suppose you had a curiosity to see what was the game?" Keene suggested.

"You are right, I did!"

"Then you hadn't anything to lose, and were not afraid of anybody making any important discoveries if you should be searched, and I suppose you calculated, too, that if a party was anxious to get at you he would be apt to do it, sooner or later, and the quicker the thing was over the better."

"Yes, I did reckon 'bout that way, and then, too, if anybody had a suspicion that there was something wrong 'bout me, the quicker they discovered that there wasn't the better it would be for me," Joe Bowers observed, shrewdly.

"Oh, yes, you were right about that."

"If you follered my yarn closely mebbe you saw that the main thing the gang was arter was papers?"

"Yes, I understood that. They were under the impression that you had some kind of papers concealed in your clothes."

"And now what kind of papers would a man, coming inter a camp of this hyer kind, be apt to have hid away?"

"Legal documents—warrants of arrest, or papers executed by some proper authority, showing that the bearer was an officer of the law and had power to apprehend criminals," replied Keene, after thinking the matter over for a few moments.

"Yes, or, mebbe, instructions, advising him how to go ahead, or containing the names of men who were suspected," Joe Bowers added.

"I reckon you are getting at the truth of matters!" Keene declared. "These three fellows evidently thought that you were a spy, who had come into the camp with the intention of making trouble for some one, and they were anxious to find out all about the matter, so they worked the dodge of pretending to be toll-gatherers for the town."

"That is the idee! And, do you know, I've got a deal of curiosity to find out who were the three galoots that put up this job on me!" Joe Bowers declared.

"I do not doubt it. Almost any man would be curious under like circumstances."

"And, why in thunder did the cusses pick me out?" the veteran exclaimed. "What is there 'bout me to make 'em suspect that I was a spy?"

"Now, partner, you are really too much for me, and you must ask an easier question," the sport replied, shaking his head. "As I am under a cloud myself, and on the lookout for trouble all the time, I think I would be as quick to suspect that a stranger in the camp was a spy as any man in the town, but such a thought in regard to you never entered my head."

"I reckon that there are plenty of men in the valley fixed the same as you are—men who

would be apt to be uneasy if they knew that any sheriff, or sich like officer, was in the town in disguise?"

"Oh, yes, there are few men in the camp who would not be uneasy, but unless the sheriff had a big force at his back—big enough to clean out the town—he would not be able to trouble anybody."

"Do you s'picion any three men who would be likely to put up a job like this hyer one played on me?" the bumner asked.

"No, I cannot fix my mind on any three in the camp who would be apt to do such a thing."

"But you kin bet yer pile that the landlord knows."

"Yes, undoubtedly!"

"And who are his chums, eh?" the bumner asked. "He would not be apt to do a thing of this sort for anybody but a big friend."

"Well, as far as I know, he is not on particularly good terms with anybody, excepting this rancher, Featherstone, the Cowboy Dude, as they call him."

"And a feller like him, with a lot of cowboys at his back, would not have much trouble in working a scheme of this kind?" Joe Bowers suggested.

"He could do it better than any other man that I know of in the valley."

"Is there anything crooked 'bout his royal nibs?" the veteran inquired.

"No, not to my knowledge. I never heard anything said against him, but I am a new-comer here, you know, and so I am not as well posted as I might be."

"It may be, you know, that he is a bad man from 'wayback, and has got wind, some way, that a man was coming to this camp in disguise to make it warm for him, and he had no better sense than to pitch upon an innocent cuss like me!" Joe Bowers exclaimed, in tones full of indignation.

"Well, that appears to be probable."

"I reckon he is satisfied now, though!" the bumner declared, with a chuckle. "If you are going to the camp I'll give you a hand with the bundle."

"Thanks!"

And then the two descended the gulch.

CHAPTER X.

A CONSULTATION.

LEAVING the sport and the bumner to pursue their way to Ricaree City we will return to the Cowboy Dude and Black Tom Murphy.

After leaving the scene of the interview with the sport there was no conversation between the two until they got out of the gulch and into the valley.

The gulch was only a couple of miles from the camp, and after the two got into the valley they could distinguish the buildings of the town.

Featherstone was fearfully enraged at the result of his interview with the sport, and brooded over the matter with a gloomy brow until the open plain was reached, and Ricaree City appeared fair before him, then his anger found vent in words.

"This infernal scoundrel of a gambler managed to get the best of us in this encounter, but I am willing to bet big money that he will not come off so successfully the next time we lock horns!" the Cowboy Dude declared.

"We ought to have got the best of him this time, seeing that we were two to one!" Black Tom Murphy declared. "But, you see, we did not work the thing as well as we ought to have done. If we had managed differently he might not have been able to have got the drop on us."

"Yes that is true."

"We might have crept in, you know, and riddled him with shot without his knowing who it was that peppered him."

"But I wanted to have a talk with the man first," the other remarked. "Of course, he could have been laid out in the way you suggest, but we would have run a big risk by so doing. To have killed the man in that way would be nothing but an assassination."

"Yes, but if there wasn't any witnesses around the deed couldn't be brought home to us," Black Tom Murphy urged.

"We were too near the camp to run the risk!" the rancher declared. "It is not possible to say whether there were any witnesses near or not; there might be half a dozen fellows in the neighborhood, whom the report of the shots would have attracted to the spot. These miners are great hands to wander around, you know, prospecting, in the hopes of striking a rich mine."

"Yes, that is so; I did not think of that," the cowboy superintendent declared. The speaker had never been noted for being a deep thinker.

"It would not have been safe for us to have risked it," Featherstone declared. "And then, too, I had an idea that when this fellow found that I meant business, he would not dare to stand up against me."

"Well, I reckoned that you would only waste your time when you set out to chin with him," Black Tom Murphy remarked, with a wise shake of the head. "These sports are apt to be pretty plucky chaps. They have to be, you know, or else they couldn't folter the business."

If a card-sharp hadn't got a deal of sand, he couldn't stand up to the rack."

"Yes, I know that, but I did not calculate to meet any card-sharp in a camp of this kind that amounted to anything," the rancher replied. "But this man certainly seems to be a lad of metal."

"You bet!" cried the other. "He stood us off in first-class style, and there is no two ways about it! I reckon that if we had tried to climb him arter he giv'n us the warning, that we would both have been salted for keeps."

"Oh, yes, he meant business, every time. There was no mistake about that," Featherstone observed.

"This mountain lion accident is a deuced unlucky one for me, I am afraid," he continued, after a pause. "It has given this man a chance to make himself solid with the girl. He saved her life, and she naturally will look upon him in the light of a hero."

"Yes, it gave the sport a show to put in a big bluff."

"Of course it may be possible that I am jumping too hastily to a conclusion," the Cowboy Dude observed, thoughtfully. "The girl will certainly feel grateful for the service, but when she learns that he is nothing but a common, vulgar gambler, who depends on cards for a living, I do not believe that any stronger feeling than gratitude will enter her mind. She is an Eastern girl, you know, and in the East a gambler is never admitted into any decent society, but is looked upon as an outcast."

"Yes, it ought to work that way, I know," the other observed, but in a tone which plainly expressed that he had considerable doubt about the matter. "I reckon from what I have seen of her that she has all sorts of high and mighty notions, although both she and her old man are as poor as kin be and depend upon whisky-selling for a living. Still, I am one of the kind that never counts much on women. I have seen 'em kick over the traces so often, and do jest what they had not ought to do, that I have come to the opinion that they are mighty onart'in cattle, and a man who knows what is what wouldn't risk much money on them."

"All you say is true enough but I don't believe this girl will be apt to forget her eastern training in a hurry," the rancher observed. "She has been brought up like a lady. Her mother comes of a big family; she became infatuated with Valentine when she was a young girl and ran away from home to marry him."

"Valentine has never amounted to much. He is one of those weak, dough-like men, who has never been very good or very bad. He can be depended upon though to get rid of all the money he can get hold of in short order."

"That's a heap of men of that kind a-running 'round loose!" Black Tom Murphy observed with a grin.

"He never supported his wife, and if it hadn't been for her rich relations both of them would have suffered; these folks saw that Blanche had a good education, and it was expected that she would come in for a deal of money some day, and so she would if the last one of her mother's family hadn't gone into a big speculation which ruined him completely."

"Just about that time the girl's mother died, and Valentine got into a scrape so that he had to cut and run."

"He came out West here and lived from hand-to-mouth until I met him in Helena, and suggested to him to start his hotel here. I was after the girl, you know, and I thought that if I got her up in this out-of-way place I would be sure to get her."

"That was a mighty cunning calculation," the other remarked.

"Yes, and I reckoned I had a sure thing of it until to-day. I haven't been in any particular hurry about the matter, you know, for the girl has acted a little shy, but as I felt certain that everything would be all right in the end, I didn't feel at all anxious."

"But you don't feel so certain 'bout it, jest now!" Black Tom Murphy exclaimed with a hoarse chuckle.

"That is a fact!"

"You did not calculate on this sharp coming into the game?"

"No, I did not."

"Nor that a beast of a mountain cat might make a heap of mischief," and again the big cowboy chuckled.

"Well, I shall not lose any more time!" the rancher declared.

"Going right in to win, eh?"

"Yes, that is my game now. The old man knows that I expect to get the girl, and I propose now to settle the matter as quickly as I can!"

"Sharp or no sharp, hey?"

The brows of the Cowboy Dude grew dark. "If he interferes with me in this matter he had better look out for himself!" the rancher declared.

"You will try and make it warm for him!"

"You bet!"

"Wal, I reckon you kin do it without any trouble if you get a good ready on!" the other remarked.

By this time the two had reached the neighborhood of the camp.

They proceeded to the hotel. When they reached the door, Black Tom Murphy remarked that there was a man he wanted to see down the street and he would go and have a talk with him while Featherstone was in the hotel.

"All right, I reckon to stop here for an hour or so," the Cowboy Dude observed.

"I will be back inside of an hour," the other remarked as he departed.

Featherstone entered the saloon. As it happened there were no customers in the place. The landlord sat by the end of the bar smoking.

The Cowboy Dude helped himself to a chair and sat down by Big John Valentine's side.

"How are things moving?" he asked.

"Well, pretty fairly," the landlord replied. "Although I do not think that I will ever make a fortune out of this place," was the reply.

"The camp is not booming just now."

"No, it isn't, and it looks to me as if the chances are that business will get worse instead of better."

"Yes, unless some new strikes are made there is hardly a prospect of the town picking up."

"It is the general belief that there is not much likelihood of any more big leads being discovered."

"I am under that impression myself. I think that the town has seen its best days. Where is Blanche, by the way?"

"Up-stairs."

"I saw her ride toward the town as I came down Broad Gulch. Murphy and I were out for a little shooting," Featherstone remarked.

The keen eyes of the Cowboy Dude were fixed on the face of the old man, and the shade which appeared on his features did not escape Featherstone's observation.

"Yes, she was out for a ride," the landlord remarked, slowly.

"Did she tell you about her adventure?"

"Ye—yes," Valentine said, after pausing for a moment as though he was debating what to say.

"It seems to me that she ought to be a little more careful," the Cowboy Dude observed. "She evidently had a narrow escape this time, and if Keene had not happened to have been in the neighborhood, the chances are great that she would have been killed."

"So she said, and I told her that she must be more careful in the future."

"And then there is another thing to be considered about the affair," Featherstone observed. "She is now under compliment to one of the biggest rascals in the camp, and the chances are great that the fellow will presume upon the fact to attempt to cultivate her acquaintance."

"Yes, I suppose that there is danger of that, although it is something which I did not think of," Valentine replied.

"I am deuced sorry that the accident happened, for you know that I am anxious to make your daughter Mrs. Featherstone, and it is not pleasant for me to reflect that any mean, low scamp of a gambler has a claim to her gratitude."

"Well, I suppose that it is not agreeable, but then it is hardly likely that he will be apt to make any trouble," the father observed. "Then too, Blanche is a remarkably sensible girl, and she is not the kind to allow a thing of this sort to influence her at all. It was kind of the man to come to her assistance, but after all it was no more than anybody would have done under the circumstances."

"That is very true, but will Blanche have the sense to look at it in that way?" Featherstone asked, showing by his manner that he had considerable doubt about the subject.

"Oh, yes, I think so," Valentine replied, confidently. "And then, as you and she understand one another I don't see how there can be any trouble."

"Yes, but I am not sure that we do understand each other!" the Cowboy Dude declared.

The landlord looked astonished.

"How is that?" he asked.

"Well, it is my own fault, I suppose," the other answered. "I am not a very great hand for women; your daughter is the first girl whom I have ever seen that I fancied I would like to marry, and I do not suppose that I am very expert as a wooer. I have tried to make myself agreeable to her, and as she was always pleasant and sociable I took it for granted that everything was going on all right."

"Well, I supposed that it was," the father observed. "One thing is certain, you are the only man whose attentions she has ever received. There have been a dozen others tried to obtain the privilege of calling on her but she always gave them the cold shoulder."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, and that is the reason why I felt so secure about the matter, but now I am beginning to think that I have been altogether too confident, for although I have been paying Blanche attentions ever since she has come to the town, yet I have not arrived at any definite understanding with her—that is, there is no engagement between us."

"Really now, I thought there was," Valen-

tine remarked, evidently surprised by this statement. "I never said anything to either one of you about the matter but I thought that it was all arranged."

"No, we have never arrived at any understanding, but, as I said before, it was my fault, I took it for granted that everything was all right when it is possible that it is not."

"But I should have thought you would have ascertained exactly how she felt about the matter. You have a tongue in your head and you ought to have used it."

"Yes, I know that. I see now that I have acted like a donkey," the rancher admitted, frankly. "Two or three times I made up my mind that I would have a definite understanding with Blanche, but, somehow, when I attempted to approach the matter, she managed to evade the subject. I don't know exactly how she did it, but she worked it in such a way that I was not able to continue; at the time it was my idea that it was merely the natural coquetry of a young and lively girl who, although having fully made up her mind to say yes, yet wanted to put off the decisive moment as long as possible."

"Well, I have known girls to act in just that way!" Valentine declared.

"Well, it may be all right, and then again it may not be," the rancher remarked. "But I do not feel at all certain about the matter and I want to settle it either one way or the other so I will know exactly how I stand."

"That is natural, of course. If I were in your place I am sure I should feel about the matter exactly as you do."

"You know how you are situated," Featherstone continued. "If I had not taken a fancy to the girl I certainly would not have set you up in this hotel."

"Oh, yes, yes, I understand that," Valentine replied, nervously. "And I give you my word that I did not think there would be any trouble about the matter. I thought everything was going ahead all right. I am sure I have done all I could to help you, and as Blanche has never said anything against you I considered that the affair was as good as settled."

"Oh, it may be all right; I am not saying that it isn't," Featherstone remarked. "The only thing is that I am not sure of it, and I want to be!"

"Of course, of course, only reasonable indeed on your part. I do not blame you at all for wishing to be released from this state of uncertainty."

"Well, now as I am such a bad hand at bringing the girl to the point suppose you try and see what you can do," Featherstone suggested.

"All right! I will be glad to oblige you in any way," the landlord responded, affecting to be cheerful about the affair although it was plain that he was not.

"You can speak to her about the matter. I am not in any particular hurry, you know; I am not anxious to have her marry me right away if she does not feel quite prepared to become a wife, only I would like to have the matter settled in some way."

"Yes, I will speak to her as soon as she wakes up. She has gone to lie down for a while."

"All right. I am off for a business trip this afternoon; shall be gone for a day or two, and would like to have an answer when I return."

"Yes, yes, I will see to it."

"I will be much obliged if you do," said Featherstone, and then he departed.

CHAPTER XI.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

AFTER Featherstone was gone Big John Valentine remained for quite a time in deep thought. The words of the rancher made him seriously uneasy.

At last his ideas found expression in words.

"I don't know how this thing is going to turn out," he muttered. "But I am afraid that I am booked for some trouble. Blanche has never said that she was not willing to marry Featherstone, although she must know that he was paying her attentions to that end. Then, on the other hand, I never heard her say a single word in his favor, so I don't know what to think about the matter. She is an extremely self-willed, obstinate girl about some things, so different from her mother, and when she makes up her mind it is a hard matter to get her to change."

"I don't know how it is, but I have a decided apprehension that she is not going to be agreeable in this matter."

The landlord sat and brooded over the situation until his bartender came in, and then, being relieved from the care of the saloon, he went up-stairs.

Blanche was sitting in her room sewing, and without any preliminary warning the father broached the subject which was so near to his mind.

"Mr. Featherstone was here this afternoon," he said.

"Yes," responded the girl in an indifferent way, as though she took but little interest in the matter.

"He was asking after you, and was disappointed when I told him you were lying down."

"Why, he can see me at any time."

"Yes, but I think he had something particular that he wanted to see you about."

"Oh, it will keep, I guess," replied Blanche in the same indifferent way, still busy at her work.

"I see that you don't seem to comprehend, Blanche," Valentine observed. "Mr. Featherstone is in love with you, and he wanted to see to-day how you felt about the matter."

"Oh, yes, I comprehend," the girl observed, a shade of annoyance plainly visible upon her face. "I guessed what he was after when you first spoke about the matter, and I am very glad I was lying down, for I do not want to give him a chance to speak on the subject."

"How is that?" the father questioned, his features wearing a dark and gloomy expression, for he saw that his worst fears were going to be realized.

"Because I do not want to say what I will be obliged to say if he asks me to be his wife," she answered, lifting up her head for the first time and looking her father straight in the face.

"I suppose I am to understand from this that if he asks you to marry him you will refuse?" Valentine said, slowly.

"Yes, I shall be obliged to decline," Blanche replied, firmly.

"Well, I am rather surprised at this determination of yours, for I imagined that you looked with a favorable eye upon his suit."

"No, that is not so; I never have!" the girl declared, for the first time showing traces of feeling. "I merely pushed the truth from me, and would not bring myself to face it. I acted like a coward, but now, when I am brought face to face with the fate that threatens me, I feel that the time has come when I must speak out. No longer can I find refuge in silence; no longer can I by trickery avoid the issue. Father, it is an utter impossibility for me to become the wife of this man!"

Valentine did not speak for a few moments, being buried in gloomy reflections, as was plainly apparent from the look upon his face.

Finally he raised his head, which he had allowed to sink upon his breast, and said:

"It seems to me that you have acted very strangely in this matter. You must have known long ago that Featherstone was in love with you, and if he had not taken a fancy to you, he certainly would not have advanced the money to set me up in this hotel."

"Yes, I know that, and I am aware that I have acted like a mean, miserable coward in the matter!" the girl declared, with flushed cheeks. "And I am ashamed of myself when I reflect upon my conduct."

"Well, you certainly have acted foolishly."

"There is some little excuse for me," Blanche replied. "I knew how we were situated when you made this man's acquaintance in Helena. Your money was exhausted and you knew not which way to turn. Featherstone made you the offer to set you up in this hotel; it was a godsend to you and of course you accepted it. I understood at the time that the man had fallen in love with me, and if it had not been for that circumstance he would not have troubled his head about you."

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt about that."

"Well, I, like a coward, allowed you to accept the offer, although I knew that it was like selling myself!" the girl exclaimed, with bitter accent.

"Oh, how many times since I came here have I regretted my action!" she continued. "In a brisk little city like Helena, so full of business, there surely would have been plenty of work for us, if we had only sought for it, and now that I know what I do, I am so sorry that I did not endeavor to find employment in Helena. It would have been far better for me to have earned my bread by manual labor—to have even worked as a servant girl, if I could not have found anything else to do, rather than come here and place myself under obligation to this Mr. Featherstone!"

"Yes, you are right enough there. If you did not think that you would be willing to marry the man, you ought not to have come."

"I know that now, but at the time I did not realize what a grave step I was taking," she exclaimed.

"I have never known what it was to be in love with any gentleman. I had never seen a single one who caught my fancy, and as I did not know what love was, I had an idea that in time I would learn to care for Mr. Featherstone. But now the truth has suddenly flashed upon me. I do not care for him as a girl should care for a man to whom she intrusts all her future life, and I feel that if I became his wife I would doom myself to a miserable existence!"

Valentine listened in astonishment to this speech, so full of passion.

"Well, you really surprise me," he said, after a pause, for he was so much amazed that he hardly knew what to say.

"I do not wonder at that, for I am surprised at myself," she replied. "I have struggled to believe that I should learn to like this man—that if I married him love would come in time, but now that I am brought to the point when I must decide, my soul revolts at the idea, and I feel that I would rather die than marry Gilbert Featherstone."

"I suppose you are aware that this means utter ruin to me," the father said, gloomily.

"Yes, I know that we must give up this place, but we can get our living elsewhere!" Blanche declared, the light of determination shining in her face.

"Well, I am not so sure of that," the father retorted.

"I am!" the girl replied. "You can surely get along, and I will not burden you with my support, for I will go out to work for myself."

"You are making a big mistake, and I think you will live to regret it."

"Never!" the girl declared.

"Well, we will see," and then the father departed, very much depressed.

CHAPTER XII.

FORCING THE ISSUE.

AFTER leaving the hotel, Featherstone sauntered down the street, reflecting upon the situation.

That he was not pleased with the outlook was apparent from the dark look upon his face.

"Valentine himself is all right!" he exclaimed. "He will do all he can to arrange the matter, but Blanche is all wrong, I am afraid, and I can see that the old man is worried about the affair, too. He does not feel at all certain that the girl will consent. I can see that plain enough, and it isn't any wonder he feels anxious, for if things don't go right he will be in a hole."

At this point he encountered Black Tom Murphy who came out of Cohen's store.

"How did you get on?" the cowboy manager inquired.

Featherstone related the conversation between himself and Big John Valentine.

The other shook his head.

"It doesn't look promising, eh?" the rancher exclaimed.

"Not much it don't!" Black Tom Murphy replied.

"I can see that the old man is afraid the girl is not going to be willing to marry me."

"From the way he talked it certainly looks as if he feels shaky about the thing."

"We are off to-night, you know, and I told Valentine that when I returned I should expect a decided answer."

"What do you want to wait until then for?" the other queried. "If I were you I would have the matter settled either one way or the other before I left the camp to-day!"

Featherstone reflected upon this declaration for a moment.

"Well, I don't know but what you are right," he said. "Why should I wait until I return?"

"No reason for it at all, as far as I can see!"

"There is not! The matter might as well be settled first as last."

"You are reckoning that the answer will be no, I fancy," Black Tom Murphy said, in a reflective way.

"Yes, it looks so now."

"Well—what do you propose to do about it?"

"I have not made up my mind in regard to that yet, but I suppose I ought to."

"Yes, it looks to me as if you had."

"Well, I think it is safe to begin by assuming that the girl will refuse."

"And now the question is, are you dead-set to get her whether she is willing or not?"

"Yes, of course; what difference does it make?" the rancher exclaimed. "If I could arrange the matter so as to get her to marry me it would not make a bit of difference whether she was willing or not. After we were married she would very soon get used to the position, and I have no doubt that we would get along just as well as though she had been over head and ears in love with me before the union."

"Oh, yes, no doubt 'bout that!" Black Tom Murphy exclaimed. "Gals are queer cattle, anyway, and, as far as my experience goes with 'em, a man is a fool to pay any attention to their notions."

"I reckon you are about right there."

"You bet I am!" the other exclaimed. "Now my advice is to get the girl to say yes or no as quickly as you kin, and if it is no—"

"The chances are a thousand to one that it will be no, to my thinking!" the rancher interrupted.

"Then you want to fix some plan so she will be obliged to marry you whether she wants to or not."

"That is my game, undoubtedly!"

"How will the old man be? Do you think you kin depend upon him to give you a lift?"

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly!" Featherstone declared. "He depends entirely on me. It is my money that is keeping him going now. The hotel just makes a living for him, that is all; and he has never been able to pay back any of the money that I advanced him to start the place, and if I should demand the cash it would bust him up."

"It 'pears to me that you have got him in a pretty tight place!"

"Oh, yes, and he will be willing to do almost anything to get out of it too, I reckon, when he discovers that I am going to put the screws on."

"Everything is all right then!" Black Tom Murphy asserted. "The first p'int is to git the

gal up to the scratch. Then, if she is going to be ugly, you will have to hatch up some nice little plan so that you will be able to git her whether she is willing or not, and if the old man is game to help you the chances are big that you will be able to do the trick."

"There will be no doubt that he will be glad to do all in his power to help the thing along, and the old fellow is not inclined to be squeamish either where there is a chance to make some money. He has admitted to me in moments of confidence that he has been mixed up in some pretty ugly scrapes in the East, and I am satisfied from what he has said that he is a fugitive from justice."

"Had to cut his lucky and run, eh?"

"Yes, not a doubt of it, and you can be safe in betting all the money you have got that if Big John Valentine sees a chance to get out of this hole by aiding some scheme which will make his daughter Mrs. Featherstone, whether she likes it or not, he will jump at the opportunity."

"It 'pears to me then that you have a clear field afore you, and a mighty good sight for your money!" Black Tom Murphy declared.

"Yes, it will be some little trouble to arrange the matter, but we can do it all right."

"The first thing is to get the gal to speak, and if I were you, I would tell her myself and bring her right to the p'int."

"Yes, I will do so."

Just at this point Pistol Pete came along and insisted upon the pair coming up to his place and having a drink.

It was a good hour before they could get away from Pistol Pete's Palace, and then they proceeded directly to the hotel, arriving there just in time to meet Big John Valentine as he came down-stairs from his interview with Blanche.

"Have you seen your daughter?" the rancher asked.

"Yes, I have just come from her," the landlord replied.

"And I reckon from the look on your face that things are not as you would like them to be?" Featherstone remarked.

"That is a fact—they are not," Valentine responded, with a doleful shake of the head.

"You spoke to her?"

"Yes."

"And she is not agreeable."

"No, she is not; and mighty sorry I am, too!" the landlord declared, and it was plain that he spoke the truth.

"Suppose I have a talk with her," the rancher suggested.

"All right, I am willing."

"Then I can see for myself just how she feels about the matter," Featherstone remarked.

"That's nothing like a man seeing for himself in a case of this kind," Black Tom Murphy added.

"Very true! I will call her down to the parlor," said Valentine, and immediately departed.

The pair seated themselves to await his return. He was back in a few minutes, and made the announcement that the girl was in the parlor.

Featherstone repaired to the apartment.

Blanche received him pleasantly enough, but there was a look upon her face which warned the rancher that she had nerved herself for a disagreeable interview.

Featherstone did not waste time, but came at once to the object he had in view.

Blanche listened attentively, although a troubled look was on her face, and then in a few well-chosen words she expressed her regret that she could not give a favorable answer.

"Suppose you do not let this conclude the matter, but take time to think over it," he urged. "You may, upon reflection, come to the conclusion to change your mind."

"Oh, no!" she replied, in a very decided way. "That is altogether unlikely. I can give you an answer now as well as though I reflected for months upon your proposal."

"And you are quite sure that you will not change your mind?"

"Quite sure!" she answered, firmly.

"This will be a severe blow to your father, for he favors my suit," the rancher remarked. "And I know he would be very much pleased if a match could be made between us two."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, and though I should like to please my father, yet in this case it is not possible for me to do so."

"Do not make any mistake about this matter," she hastened to add. "This decision is not one to which I have arrived on the spur of the moment, but I have given deep and earnest thought to it. I know that my father wishes me to marry you, and I have striven with all my power to bring myself to consent to the union, but I find that it is not possible for me to do so. I fully understand all the consequences which may follow my decision. I comprehend the nature of the situation. I know that my father is so situated that he can be ruined if you choose to say the word—that we can be driven out upon the world, very little better than beggars, but, in spite of all this, the only answer that I can give to your suit now, as in the future, is no!"

"Well, I am very sorry indeed, but notwithstanding this firmly expressed determination I

shall continue to hope that in time you will change your mind," Featherstone responded, and then he bowed himself out.

When he returned to the saloon Big John Valentine surveyed him with anxious eyes.

The rancher took a chair and sat by the other two.

"It is no go!" he exclaimed.

"She wouldn't have it?" Big Tom Murphy exclaimed.

"Not by a jugful!" Featherstone replied.

"Maybe she will change her mind in time," the father suggested, nervously.

"She will not, unless she is placed in such a position that she can't help herself!" the rancher remarked.

Valentine caught at the suggested idea at once.

"Can't we work it so that the game will run that way?" he asked, sinking his voice almost to a whisper.

"Are you game to go into a scheme of that kind?" Featherstone questioned.

"Yes, of course I am! Do you suppose that I am such a fool as to let the stupid stubbornness of a self-willed girl stand between me and prosperity?" the landlord cried, angrily.

"It is a bargain then!" Featherstone said.

"When I return I will devise some scheme and you can rest assured that we will work it so I can get the girl whether she is willing or not."

This declaration ended the conference.

CHAPTER XIII.

HELD UP.

THE stage coach which left White Sulphur Springs had covered half the distance which separated the Springs from Diamond City, the objective point to which the coach was bound.

On this trip the vehicle had a particularly select party on board, although there were only three passengers.

There was a portly six-footer, with flowing iron-gray hair and beard, which gave him a lion-like aspect, no less a personage than General Abraham Beeswing, Governor of Montana; a short, thick-set, broad-shouldered man, almost as broad as he was long, a gentleman well in years, as his white hairs showed; his smoothly shaven face with its big double chin betrayed signs that the owner did not neglect the good things of this life.

This was chief justice, Judge Jefferson Jones.

The third was a tall, angular man, with jet-black hair and beard, Colonel "Jim" Macarthy by name, reputed to be the richest and keenest speculator in the territory.

The party had been over to White Sulphur Springs to look at some property which the wily Colonel Jim had discovered, and as the deal was a little more than he could handle himself he had got the governor and the judge to join him in the speculation.

It was a jovial party!

Both the judge and the speculator were born story-tellers, and they had brightened the tedious journey with many a laughable tale.

The party were in an excellent humor for they had made a splendid bargain, as Colonel Jim declared.

"Tisn't every day, gentlemen, that a man gets a chance to put in ten thousand dollars and pull out a hundred thousand in its place!"

"Oh, it is a big thing! There is not a doubt of that!" the governor declared with the air of an oracle.

"Yes, yes, and we are in on the ground floor!" the judge exclaimed with a chuckle of delight.

The stage coach came to a sudden stop.

The governor and the judge were sitting on the back seat, facing Colonel Macarthy, who had the front one all to himself.

The coach stopped so abruptly that the passengers were almost thrown from their seats.

"Hello! what the deuce is the matter?" cried the governor in amazement.

"Something must have given way, I presume," said the judge.

"Mighty odd!" cried the colonel.

And then all three stuck their heads out of the coach windows.

But the three heads came in from the windows much quicker than they went out, and for a good reason, too.

On each side of the coach were two men who leveled cocked revolvers at the passengers as the heads were poked through the windows.

The four men had their faces hid by flour-bags drawn on over their heads, with holes cut in them for eyes and mouth, a most effectual disguise.

"Hold up your hands, pardners!" cried the masked man who confronted the governor. "Don't attempt to come any funny business, or we will blow the hull top of yer heads off!"

The passengers looked at each other and their under jaws dropped.

This was a most disgusting situation.

All were armed, and with revolvers of the newest and most expensive pattern, but under these peculiar circumstances their weapons were no more use to them than if they had been bits of harmless wood.

"Now, then, pardners, have the kindness to light down, lively, and give your weapons to

the man at the door as you git out!" the outlaw leader continued.

"Be keerful 'bout cutting up any monkey-shines! No dropping your watches or wallets on the floor of the coach, or stuffing 'em in the cushions, 'cos we are up to all them tricks, and we will ketch you dead to rights, every time!"

By this time the governor had recovered from the consternation produced by the attack and he was unwise enough to believe that the announcement of who he was would deter the bold road-agents.

"Men, you will get yourselves into serious trouble if you persist in this attack!" he exclaimed, in a very indignant tone. "I judge that you have little idea of who I am, of the nature of the high office I hold!"

"Why, I know you as well as though you were my own brother!" the road-agent chief cried. "You are Bald Billy who runs the faro-bank in Diamond City!"

Despite the peril which threatened the party the judge and the colonel could not repress a grin when they beheld the effect that this announcement produced upon their companion.

"Bald Billy be hanged!" he yelled, indignantly. "I am General Abraham Beeswing, Governor of Montana!"

"Why so it is!" exclaimed the road-agent, pretending to examine the features of the official, attentively. "But I s'war, governor, you are so blamed like that sneaking, no-soul, white-livered galoot Bald Billy, that you would do to pass for twins."

And at this jest the other disguised men laughed heartily.

As for the governor he was almost struck dumb at the audacity of the outlaw.

"Well, come, hop out lively, governor!" the road-agent continued in a brisk, business-like way. "I reckon I am a heap sight better pleased to see you than I would be to see Blind Billy, although I freely admit that I would like to get a chance at that thieving galoot, for the last time I was in his shebang, and stacked up ag'in his bank, I lost five hundred good solid chucks so quick that it made my head swim, but it is all the same; I will get squar' on you, seeing that you look so much like him."

"But I say, my man, now that you know who I am you surely will not dare to persist in this outrage!" the governor exclaimed.

"Why, governor, hain't I got to collect the toll?" the outlaw exclaimed, affecting to be astonished. "Now what sort of a toll-keeper would you take me to be if I let you go free jest because you happened to be Governor of the Territory? Why, I reckon you would be hustling 'round jest as soon as you get to Helena to appoint some other galoot in my place."

"No, sir-ee! nobody goes free over this hyer road! Every mother's son must pony up!"

Then the outlaw affected for the first time to catch sight of the other two.

"Hello! why bless my stars! if this hyer ain't a reg'lar surprise party! Judge Jones, I am proud to see you, the same to you Colonel Jim! Well, now, the sight of you three distinguished bucks is good for a man with sore eyes! Now I come to think of it I heered that you-un's were over to White Sulphur Springs, but I didn't reckon that I would corral you so soon."

This speech convinced the passengers that they were the victims of a carefully devised plot, and the governor by this time came to the conclusion that he could not make anything by attempting to stand upon his dignity.

"Well, since you have got us in a tight place I suppose we will have to comply with your demands," the official said. "But I can assure you that you are making a serious mistake in robbing men like ourselves, for the whole country will ring with the outrage and you most certainly will be captured and punished," and as he spoke the governor descended from the coach.

"Why, is your money so much better than anybody else's?" the road-agent chief demanded sarcastically.

"You will find that robbing me will cause you more trouble than if I was a common man," the governor replied, tartly.

"Wal, I reckon we will have to take our chances on that! 'Tain't every day, you know, that galoots in my line of business git a chance to hold up a governor!" And then he laughed hoarsely, his companions joining in the merriment.

"Now hand over your we'pons, governor, and then oblige me by shelling out your wealth."

The official was in the toils, and so he complied with the command, although it was with an ill grace.

The governor's revolver the outlaw chief stuck in his belt, the wallet which was full of money he put in his pocket.

"Now yer watch and chain, and I see a nice little sparkler on yer finger, too," the outlaw chief remarked. "That is the genuine article, I s'pose? I reckon a man like yourself wouldn't be mean enough to wear no glass diamond."

"I say now, you ought to be satisfied with the wallet and leave me the jewelry," the governor remarked. "There is over five hundred dollars in the wallet."

"Glad to hear it!" cried the road-agent.

"That is jest the kind of a wallet I like to git hold on, but as for the jewelry, governor, I really will have to take keer on it for you. You see, this hyer is a mighty lonely trail 'tween hyer and Diamond City, and it is jest as likely as not that you might meet with some scamps who would go in for to rob you of your jewelry, but if I take keer of it for you now you will know jest whar it is, and yer mind will be easy; so hand it over!"

General Beeswing saw that there was no use of wasting time in remonstrating, and so with a sour face he handed over his valuables.

"Escort his high and mighty Excellency, the Governor of Montana to a seat in the grand stand!" cried the outlaw chief and he waved his hand to a pile of rocks a hundred feet off.

Away went the general in charge of one of the masked men.

"Now, Judge Jones, if you will have the kindness to promenade down the center, swing your pardner, and pass over your plunder!" cried the road-agent chief, jocosely.

The judge descended from the coach.

He surrendered his wallet, which was filled to bursting with bills, gave up a watch and chain, worth a couple of hundred of any man's money, as the road-agent remarked, when he received the articles, surveying them with a critical eye.

The judge had some handsome and valuable rings which the outlaw demanded.

"Well, there is one consolation for me in this thing," the chief justice remarked with a grimace.

"What is that?"

"I shall probably have the pleasure of passing the death sentence on you one of these days unless you are lucky enough to get shot," the judge replied, grimly.

"Oh, don't you count on that!" the outlaw retorted. "The rope is not spun, nor the bullet run, which will take my life."

"That is what every man in your line declares, whether he believes it or not, but there is not a man-jack of you all but what dies by bullet, steel or rope in the end," the judge declared.

"Oh we are all right, we have all got our lives insured!" the outlaws cried, and then the rest laughed, hoarsely, at the remark.

"Now, judge, take a reserved seat alongside the governor, so as to keep him from getting lonely."

It was plainly to be seen that the outlaw chieftain desired to be considered a humorist.

The judge obeyed the command.

The road-agent then turned his attention to the speculator.

"Come, now it is your turn, Colonel Jim!" he said.

"I am yours to command!" exclaimed that gentleman pleasantly as he descended from the coach.

Macarthy was too old a stager to manifest any ill-humor.

He knew enough of the road-agents, and their ways of doing business, to be aware that the best method of getting along with them was to submit cheerfully to their decrees.

"Colonel Jim, it really pains me to be obliged to ask you to shell out!" the outlaw chief declared with a solemn shake of the head.

"Is that so?" the speculator exclaimed, surprised by the statement, while the governor and the judge looked astonished.

"That is a sure enuff fact!" the outlaw replied. "You see, you are in the same boat with us and we professionals ought not to skin one another."

"Oh, that is it, eh?" the speculator exclaimed, wincing a little under the thrust.

"Yes, dog ought not to eat dog, you know, and you are sich a first-class hand at the art of collecting shekels without giving up much of anything for them that I really feel pained at being obliged to trouble you for your wealth, and I would not do it either if we wasn't so blamed hard up; but, you see, we want money in the worst way, and so we are forced to go through you."

"You kin consider it as a loan though," the road-agent added. "And if you will give me your address I will see that the amount is paid back just as soon as we can arrange the matter."

"Well, I can assure you that I feel excessively obliged," the colonel replied with a polite bow of acknowledgment, entering into the spirit of the thing, just as if he believed that the foot-pad meant what he said.

"I shall strive to keep your kindness in my mind, as there may come a time when I will be able to return it."

"Oh, that is all right!" the road-agent exclaimed. "As you are in the same line of business as ourselves, relieving the public at large of their wealth, although you work the trick by cunning, having the gift of the gab, while we are compelled to trust to shooting-irons, it ain't jest the cheese for us to skin you, and, as I said afore, we would not do it if we could help ourselves, but as we cannot, we must go ahead. So fork over your wealth, if you please!"

The colonel surrendered his wallet, which was not particularly well filled.

"Thunder and lightning!" exclaimed the out-

law as he opened the wallet, pulled out the roll of bills and examined them. "Only fifty odd dollars! Why, Colonel Jim, I am surprised! The idea of a man like yourself a-going traveling round the country no better heeled than that!"

"You ought to have struck me as I went into White Sulphur Springs, not on my coming out," the speculator remarked. "I had a heap sight more money then."

"Oh, I see! you left yer big roll at the Springs?"

"Yes."

"Put up a thousand, mebbe, expecting to catch fifty!"

"That is the way I usually try to work the game," the speculator replied, with a smile.

"Wal, if you give us warning when you corral the fifty thousand pot, as to the road you will travel, we will be glad to help you take keer of some of it," the outlaw chief remarked.

"Why, certainly, of course!" Colonel Macarthy exclaimed. "You have such a persuasive way with you that it is hard work for a man to refuse you anything."

"Oh, we are white, clean through!" the road-agent declared. "Now, Colonel Jim, I will have to trouble you for yer watch and jewelry."

"Well, now, I had an idea that you would not care to take the jewelry," the speculator remarked, banteringly, as he proceeded to comply with the demand.

"Wal, if it wasn't for the fact that we have cleaned out the governor and the judge we would be apt to let you run," the footpad chief declared. "But we don't want to hurt their feelings, you know, by making flesh of one and fish of the other, so we will have to clean you out, jest the same as the rest."

So the speculator's jewelry was sent to join the rest in the capacious pocket of the outlaw.

"Do you wish me to take a reserved seat on the grand stand, too?" the colonel asked, entering into the joke of the outlaw.

"Not yet! Have not quite got through with you yet, Colonel Jim," the road agent replied.

The regulator elevated his eyebrows in astonishment.

"Not through with me?" he questioned.

"Not quite!" and the outlaw chief laughed.

"The fact is, colonel, you are sich a mighty slippery cuss that I have got to keep my eyes on you. I know powerful well that you kin git away with any common man in a trade and not half try either, and I am reckoning that it ain't impossible you have played some little game on me."

"How so?" exclaimed the speculator, affecting to be vastly astonished.

"You stood in the coach while I were going through the governor and the judge, and I reckon that you had plenty of time to stow away some of your wealth, so I will have to trouble you to turn your pockets inside out."

"Certainly!" exclaimed Colonel Macarthy, cheerfully. "I must say that you understand your business as well as any man I ever met in your line."

"Yes, the man who picks me up for a slouch will get left."

Colonel Macarthy turned his pockets inside out one by one, but no more money was produced.

"You did not catch on that time!" the speculator exclaimed, with a laugh.

"Oh, you are a cunning duck, and no mistake!" the road agent chief declared, in a tone full of deep admiration.

"Is that all?"

"Oh, no!"

"What else?" and again the eyebrows of the speculator were elevated.

"Jest unbutton yer vest! I hain't seen a noble biled shirt for so long that my eyes are hungry for a sight of one."

The colonel hesitated, and it was plain he was embarrassed.

"Come, hurry up and delight my eyes!" the outlaw chief exclaimed. "Never mind if it ain't so clean as it ought to be, I will excuse it."

The speculator saw that he was in the toils and so he complied with the request.

When the vest was opened and the shirt-bosom exposed, lo! there was a good "fat" roll of bills sticking in the waistband of the pantaloons.

The colonel had watched his opportunity while the examination of the governor was going on, and the attention of his guard was for a moment withdrawn, to slip the bills out of his wallet and secrete them inside of his vest.

"Thunder and lightning! Colonel Jim, I reckon you done forgot that ar' roll that you had in thar when you g'n up your wealth!" the outlaw chief exclaimed in tones of wonder, just as if he was much surprised by the discovery.

"Yes, I reckon I did," the speculator replied, endeavoring to put as good a face as possible upon the matter.

"Wal, these leetle things will slip from a man's mind once in a while. Hand it over, please!"

The colonel complied.

"Three hundred and twenty dollars!" observed the outlaw as he finished the count of the money.

"Wal, that is something like."

"Now, colonel, jine the governor and judge."

Keep quiet for ten minutes and then you kin go on.

"So long! see you ag'in sometime. Vamose!" And then the road-agents plunged into the bushes and disappeared.

A more successful robbery was never accomplished.

CHAPTER XIV.

SEEKING VENGEANCE.

THE three victims looked at each other and not a word was spoken until the rustling in the bushes stopped, showing that the road-agents had got out of hearing, then the governor broke the silence.

"Well; upon my word, gentlemen, I must admit that this outrage beats anything that I ever heard of in all my experience!" he exclaimed.

"I do not believe that a bolder assault than this is recorded in the annals of the West!" the judge declared.

"There is no disputing, gentlemen, that this man is away up at the top of the heap in his peculiar line!" the colonel declared in accents of admiration.

"He is a genius, gentlemen, and no mistake. If he had not been, he never would have tumbled to the little game I played," the speculator added.

"That is a fact," the governor remarked. "There is no doubt that the scoundrel is a clever one, but that is no consolation for the loss we have sustained."

"No, by gad! it isn't!" the judge exclaimed.

"The miserable rascal! If I ever get a chance at the scoundrel when I am on the bench you can depend upon it that I will give him all the law allows!"

"Well, that may be a consolation to you, judge, but I will be hanged if it is to me!" the governor declared.

"You object to being robbed, even if it is done in a scientific manner, eh?" Colonel Macarthy observed.

"Yes, sir, I do decidedly!" the official responded.

"And in my opinion the mock politeness on the part of this scamp was only adding insult to injury."

"But I can tell you, gentlemen, that I will make this affair cost all these rascals dearly before I get through with them," the governor continued, getting more and more indignant as he reflected upon the details of the robbery.

"You propose to make an attempt to hunt them down, I suppose," the judge said.

"Yes, sir, I do, most decidedly!" the official responded in a manner which plainly showed he meant what he said.

"The moment I arrive in Helena I shall set the machinery of the law in motion. I will have these rascals hunted down if it is possible for the feat to be accomplished by the wit of man, and of course there is no doubt that it can be done," the governor announced.

"Oh, yes, it is only a question of time and money," the judge remarked.

The speculator shook his head, and it was evident from the expression upon his face that he did not agree with his companions in regard to this matter.

"Well, I tell you what it is, gentlemen," he said. "In my opinion you will have a deal more trouble in catching these road-agents than you seem to anticipate."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the governor. "All that is necessary to be done is to put plenty of men on the case and offer a big reward."

"Yes, that is it!" the judge coincided. "The country must be roused, and the offer of a large reward will put so many men on the track of these scoundrels that it will not be possible for them to escape arrest."

"Oh, I am with you, gentlemen, in any game that you choose to put up!" the colonel declared.

"You must not think that because I am under the impression the scheme will be far more difficult to carry out than you imagine, that I am not with you heart and soul, because I am, and if money is needed I am ready to put up my share."

"Money, well, hum, ha!" said the governor, in a reflective way. "Certainly a reward must be offered for the apprehension of these outlaws, or else we will not be able to induce private citizens to go into the thing, but as governor of the Territory I can offer a reward for the capture of the fellows; that is strictly in the line of my duty, you know."

"Oh, yes, not a doubt of it!" the judge declared. "And, under the circumstances, you are fully justified in doing it."

Both the governor and judge were noted for being extremely close with their money, and it was apparent that although they smarted under the outrage which had been perpetrated upon them, yet they did not intend to spend any money of their own to aid in bringing the road-agents to justice if they could help it.

"Oh, yes, as Governor of the Territory there is no doubt that you have authority to offer a good, big reward for the capture of these rascals," the speculator remarked. "But it was my idea that it was our game to chip in and offer a private reward. There is a good deal of

red tape about all Government business, and men are a little suspicious that if they go into an affair of this kind, and succeed in making a success of it, that, at the last moment, some Government officer would pop up and claim a big share of the reward."

"Well, I don't know," the governor said, thoughtfully. "Don't you think that the regular officers of the law will be able to catch the scoundrels?"

"They certainly ought to be able to do it!" the judge declared. "Marshal Bill Hendrix of Helena, is an able and determined man and if he started in to arrest these outlaws I think the chances are good that he would succeed."

"And Hendrix is under obligations to me, too," the governor asserted. "So I feel sure he would do all in his power to aid me in any way."

"The marshal is a good man enough, but he is a politician and not a thief-catcher, and there is an old adage, gentlemen, which says, every man to his trade. If I wanted to work a political game there is not a fellow in Montana whom I would choose in preference to Bill Hendrix, for what he don't know about pulling wires in a political line is not worth knowing, but when it comes to catching a keen, cunning rascal of the style of this road-agent, I tell you, gentlemen, the marshal will not 'be in it' at all!"

The confident declaration of the speculator, who was well known to be a most excellent judge of mankind, had due weight with the governor and the judge.

"Well, what would you advise?" asked General Beeswing.

"Yes, let us hear from you on the subject!" exclaimed the judge. "I presume you have some scheme in your mind?"

"Oh, yes, or else I should not have said anything. I am not one of the kind of men who talks merely for the pleasure of hearing the sound of my own voice," Colonel Macarthy declared.

"Yes, yes, we understand that. Everybody who knows you, colonel, knows that you are Old Business from A to Z!" the governor remarked.

"You are eminently practical; there is no doubt about that," the judge asserted.

"Well now, the idea of General Beeswing offering a reward, as Governor of the Territory, for the apprehension of these rascals, is all right," the speculator observed. "But, in addition to that reward, my notion was for us to chip in and put up about a thousand dollars—there were five men in this party, and a thousand would be two hundred apiece for each man. Make the offer two hundred dollars apiece, dead or alive, then go to Bob Chutney, who runs a little private detective business in Helena, and get him to take the job. Put up two hundred for him, right in the beginning, so as to show that we are in earnest about the matter. I do not think there is a doubt that he will jump at the chance, for he will be sure of the thousand, besides standing a show to get the Government reward, if he succeeds in catching the men."

"That will be about three hundred and thirty-three dollars apiece," the governor observed.

"Quite a little sum to put out, in addition to the loss which we have already suffered," the judge remarked.

"Gentlemen, revenge is a luxury, and luxuries come high," Colonel Macarthy declared, impressively. "Now, for my own part, I don't mind going a few hundred dollars, if by the expenditure of the money I can succeed in getting square with these rascals who have had such a picnic at our expense."

"Well, if it is your opinion that Marshal Hendrix, and the regular machinery of the law, will not be able to lay these fellows by the heels, I would prefer to pay three or four hundred dollars, rather than not have the scoundrels punished," the governor remarked.

"That is just the way I feel about the matter," the judge declared. "If General Beeswing, as Governor of the Territory, offers a reward of a thousand dollars, say, for the apprehension of the rascals, and that offer will be the means of capturing them, I don't see the necessity of our moving in the matter."

"Certainly not!" the colonel exclaimed. "But, I am going on the idea that the regular officers of the law will not be able to do anything."

"Suppose we give the matter a trial, before we do anything on our own hook," the governor suggested. "I will issue a proclamation offering a reward of a thousand dollars for the apprehension of these five men, or two hundred dollars apiece for any of the band; then we can wait for a while and see how the thing works. If it does not result in the capture of the scoundrels then we can try your plan, colonel, and call in this private detective."

"The governor has exactly voiced the ideas which I have upon the subject!" the judge declared.

Colonel Macarthy comprehended that the pair had made up their minds not to spend any of their own money if they could help it, even to gratify their desires for revenge, and so he

made no further effort to persuade them to adopt the only course, which, in his judgment, promised success.

"All right, gentlemen, I bow to the will of the majority," he observed. "You can try your plan, and if it does not work then you can fall back on mine."

"Yes, yes, there will be plenty of time," the governor remarked.

"Let me see—that ten minutes is about up, I should think," the judge said.

"Yes, I should say so, and we might as well resume our seats!" the colonel added.

Then the three approached the stage.

The driver, a fat, jolly-looking fellow, turned in his seat and gazed down upon the party as they came up to the coach.

"I was just a going to call you, gents," he said. "For I reckoned that it was 'bout time we got out of this hyer."

"Did you ever encounter these scoundrels before, driver?" the governor asked.

"No, but then I ain't bin a-driving on this route only for a week," the man replied. "But I have heered ov 'em afore."

"Aha! you have!" General Beeswing exclaimed, while the other two were "all ears."

"Oh, yes, 'tain't the first time that they have held up a stage on this trail!" the Jehu announced.

"Strange that no one in the White Sulphur Springs warned us that there was danger of our being robbed on this route!" the judge exclaimed.

"Well, I reckon that nobody suspicioned that there was any danger," the driver replied. "It is a good month now since they held up a coach on this trail, and I s'pose everybody thought they had dusted to some other part of the country. The gang have done more work on the trails to the north of the Big Belt range than down in this region."

"It is an old established gang then?" the governor remarked.

"Wal, as near as I kin recollect, I furst heered on 'em 'bout a year ago," the driver said, in a reflective way.

"A year ago!" exclaimed the governor, in astonishment. "The fellows have been at it for some time then?"

"Yes, but not down in this region, you understand," explained the driver. "I reckon it was only 'bout three months ago when they furst stopped a coach on this trail. The Flour-sack Gang is the name they go by."

"Ah, I see, because they disguise themselves by drawing a flour-sack on over their heads," the judge remarked.

"That's the reason, I reckon, but there's no telling that this gang is the same as t'other one w'ot used to operate to the north of the range, 'cos this party may have got the idee of the flour-sack biz from the others, but I reckon 'tis 'cos thar was five in that gang and thar were five in this."

"Probably the same," the governor observed. "But let us get in, gentlemen, and proceed on our way. I will put a nice rod in pickle for these rascals when I get to Helena."

A minute later the coach was in motion en route for Diamond City.

CHAPTER XV.

BAFFLED.

In due time the three arrived at Helena and their tale of the robbery excited considerable comment.

The first thing that the governor did was to summon Marshal Hendrix.

The marshal came; a long-bearded, ponderous fellow with a pompous way, a politician, pure and simple, who was reported to have feathered his nest pretty well since coming to Montana.

At the governor's suggestion Judge Jefferson Jones and Colonel Macarthy were present at the conference.

The marshal listened attentively while General Beeswing related the story of the robbery.

"The boldest thing of the kind that I ever heard of in all my experience in the West!" the marshal declared, emphatically. "The fellows were mighty rash too! The idea of tackling men like yourself and Judge Jones! I don't mean any disrespect to you, colonel," he added. "You are not a public man, and they might consider you to be fair game, but when it comes to holding up the governor of the Territory and the chief justice, then it must be admitted that the fellows went in to play the biggest kind of a game!"

"Yes, and it is my idea that I will be able to make them repent of their rashness before I get through with the gang!" the governor declared.

"Ah, yes, no doubt about that!" the marshal exclaimed in the most positive way.

"I am going to offer a reward of a thousand dollars for the apprehension of the gang!" General Beeswing remarked.

"That will fetch 'em sure!" the marshal cried. "Such a reward as that will rouse the whole country. I should not be surprised if the scoundrels were run down inside of a week! I will look after the matter myself, and put some of my best men on the case!"

The governor and the judge were delighted by the assurance, but Colonel Macarthy stuck his

tongue in his cheek in a knowing way; he held his peace though.

The governor wrote out the proclamation offering a thousand dollars reward for the apprehension of the gang, and then the marshal departed to make it public.

The governor could not resist the temptation to crow over the speculation a little.

"Well, what do you think now?" he asked, rubbing his fat hands cheerfully together. "You see judge and I were right in thinking that there was no need of our offering a reward out of our own pockets."

"No, I don't see it!" the colonel exclaimed, bluntly. "Can it be possible that two old and experienced men of the world can be so easily fooled by a little loud talk? Upon my word I am astonished!"

"Don't you think that the marshal will be able to catch the rascals?" the governor demanded, nettled by the incredulity of the speculator.

"No, I do not! I do not take the least stock in his assertions, and I will tell you what I will be willing to do, gentlemen: I will back my opinions with good money! I will bet you anything you like that Hendrix does not catch these road-agents!"

The governor and the judge looked at each other.

To use the common saying, neither one had any "sporting blood in their veins," and they did not dare to accept the offer.

"Hum, ha!" said the governor, "really, colonel, I am not a betting man, you know, but if I were I would surely make a wager with you, for it is my opinion that I would certainly win."

"That is what I think!" the judge declared. "But as I never bet, I cannot back up my opinion with money."

"Well, in a case of this kind, money talks, you know," the speculator rejoined.

"Even if the marshal and his men do not succeed in entrapping the scoundrels, the offer of the large reward may stimulate private parties to capturing the road-agents," the governor remarked.

"Oh, yes, there are a lot of may-bes in this world, but they do not always pan out as they ought to," the colonel remarked, significantly. "Still, it is idle to waste time in speculating upon the matter. All we can do is to wait and see how the thing will work."

The publication of the proclamation excited considerable attention, but the people at large did not forsake their occupation and go to hunting road-agents, if they were worth two hundred dollars apiece.

They reasoned that there was about as much chance of catching the men who had robbed the coach, seeing that they had a good two days' start of justice, as there was of finding the traditional needle in a bundle of hay.

The marshal blustered around; got together an armed force and rode to White Sulphur Springs.

He was after clues, and loudly proclaimed that if he could get on the track of the road-agents it would not take him long to run them down.

But the men who had been bold enough to rob the governor of the Territory were not giving any points away, and the marshal could not get any more clues to the marauders than if they had never existed.

Ten days he fooled away in the neighborhood of White Sulphur Springs and Diamond City, and then returned to Helena to report that his mission had not been crowned by success.

"You see the chances are big, you know, that after securing so great a haul, the rascals have disbanded the gang and each man taken a different road," he explained to excuse his want of success. "And as they had so big a start they had the chance to get clear out of this Territory before I started in on their trail."

This explanation was made to General Beeswing and Judge Jones in presence of Colonel Macarthy who had been on the watch for the marshal's return so as to be able to be present when he made his report, and he could not resist a quiet smile of triumph as he gazed upon the disappointed pair.

"Well, well, I must say that I did not expect this!" the governor exclaimed. "I felt sure that the offer of a thousand dollars would be certain to insure the capture of the rascals."

"Undoubtedly it would, governor, if the fellows were in the Territory," the marshal replied.

"But you see, gentlemen, after making such a haul as this, it is only natural for the fellows to give leg bail as soon as possible. Why, the chances are big that they are five hundred to a thousand miles away by this time."

"It is my opinion that they are old hands at the game," the marshal continued, with a solemn wag of his big head. "And being men up to all sorts of dodges, they knew that after they had held up the governor and the chief justice of the Territory the quicker they got out of the neighborhood the better."

"This is extremely annoying!" Judge Jones declared in anger. "Hang it all! I would rather give five hundred dollars out of my own pocket than have the scoundrels escape!"

"So would I, so would I!" the governor exclaimed. "By Jove! it is monstrous to think that the governor of the Territory can be robbed with impunity!"

The colonel could not help indulging in a sarcastic smile as he noted the indignation of the pair.

"It is a shame that we cannot bring these rascals to justice," the judge observed.

"That is a fact," the marshal admitted. "But it is one of those cases where all a man can do is to grin and bear it."

"No possible way, as far as you see, to get on the track of the scoundrels?" the governor asked.

The marshal affected to reflect upon the matter for a few moments, and then he shook his head.

"Wal, no, governor, I don't see a show to get after them," he replied. "If the men had kept together in a gang, there might be a chance, but you are safe in betting all the money that you can get hold of that they have scattered to the four quarters of the compass, and it is my belief that there isn't a man of 'em in Montana to-day!"

This positive assertion had due weight with General Beeswing, who had great faith in the marshal's judgment, but the judge was not so easily satisfied.

"It seems to me, marshal, that it is impossible for any one to be certain whether the men are in the Territory or not," Judge Jones remarked. "I will admit that it appears as though the chances are great the scoundrels have made haste to get out of harm's way, but there is a possibility, you know, that they have some hiding-place near at hand, to which they have retired, and where they will remain until the storm blows over."

"Oh, there is no denying that there is a chance that it may be so, but I must say that I don't take no stock in it," the marshal replied, with an air which seemed to say that this declaration of his ought to settle the matter.

But the judge was a persistent man, and then the quiet smile which was on the face of the speculator inspired him to keep on.

"Are you quite certain, marshal, that you have exhausted all your resources?" the judge asked.

"Yes, I reckon that I am at the end of my rope," the official replied, a trace of sulkiness in his manner, for he did not relish being thus cross-examined.

"How about this man who runs a private detective business in Helena—this Bob Chutney?" the judge inquired. "Could he not be of some service in a case of this kind?"

"Oh, I spoke to Bob; he's an old friend of mine," the marshal answered. "But he said he was too busy to go into it, and then too he did not think there was money enough in it for him."

"Well, I regret that you could not do anything," the governor observed.

"Oh, I will keep my eyes open, for something may turn up," the official declared, and then he took his departure.

The governor and the judge looked at Colonel Macarthy, who grinned at them in a tantalizing way.

"Ah, gentlemen, it is mighty lucky for you two that you are not betting men, for if you were I would have won a small fortune from you on this thing. Didn't I tell you the marshal would not be able to do anything?"

CHAPTER XVI.

A BLOODHOUND.

THE governor and the judge shook their heads like a pair of Chinese mandarins.

They hated to admit that the speculator had been correct in his surmise, but under the circumstances they could not get out of it.

"Yes, colonel, you were correct; we will have to admit that," the governor said.

"No doubt about it; but the point now is, not whether you were correct or not, but what is best to be done!" the judge remarked.

"Why, try the game that I proposed in the first place," Colonel Macarthy replied. "Raise a pool of a thousand or fifteen hundred dollars. I don't know how you gentlemen feel about the matter, but as far as I am concerned I am willing to go five hundred dollars to get square with these bold and impudent rascals."

"I will put up five hundred rather than have the scoundrels escape!" the governor declared, casting all ideas of prudence to the winds, so enraged was he when he reflected that he had not only been robbed, but he, the high and mighty governor of the Territory, a man who had an extremely good opinion of himself, had not only been robbed, but really made a laughing-stock of by a set of miserable, thieving rascals.

"I will go five hundred, too, by Jove!" Judge Jones exclaimed, inspired by the example of the governor. "It will be an everlasting disgrace to Montana if these miserable scoundrels are not caught!"

"It is understood, then, that we make up a pool of fifteen hundred dollars," the colonel said.

"Yes, that is right!" the governor replied.

"Quite correct!" cried the judge.

"That is three hundred apiece for each one of

the road agents; quite a respectable sum to offer as blood-money," Macarthy remarked.

"Yes, but how do you propose to go to work?" General Beeswing asked. "You heard what the marshal said in regard to this detective, Chutney?"

"Declared he couldn't go into it—not money enough, you know," the judge added.

"Yes, but you forget that we are going to more than double the reward, put fifteen hundred on top of the thousand, you see," the colonel observed. "And then to a man like Bob Chutney it makes a vast difference whether he does business with men like ourselves or with a man like Marshal Hendrix."

"Ah, yes, there may be something in that," the governor observed.

"It is an old saying, you know, that two of a trade seldom agree," the judge remarked. "And I suppose that the adage applies to thief-catchers as well as to men in other lines of business."

"I will arrange an interview with Chutney to-night at his office," Colonel Macarthy said. "We want to keep this thing quiet, so we will go to Bob's office to-night under cover of the darkness, and then no one will be the wiser for it."

"That idea is a good one, I think," the governor observed, after reflecting upon the matter for a moment.

"Yes, I should say so," Judge Jones coincided.

"Very well, then I will meet you here at eight to-night," the speculator said. So the matter was arranged, and the conference came to an end.

That evening, prompt to the minute, the colonel made his appearance, and found General Beeswing and Judge Jones waiting for him.

"It is all right!" he announced. "Chutney is waiting at his office to receive us."

"Aha! he is going to take the case, then?" the governor exclaimed.

"Well, no, I cannot exactly promise that," the colonel replied. "Chutney is an extremely careful man, and he always wants to be sure of his ground before he goes ahead."

"That is natural and prudent," the judge commented.

"I have always understood that he was an extremely careful man," the governor observed.

"He is business from the word go!" Colonel Macarthy declared. "His idea is to have us three come down there and talk the matter over; then if in his judgment there is a chance for him to do anything, he will go ahead."

"A decidedly different way of doing business from that followed by Marshal Hendrix," the judge remarked. "He undertook the commission at once, and was all brag and bluster about what he was going to do, and the result was an utter failure."

"Well, Chutney will not promise success, and he will not go into the thing unless he thinks that there is a fighting chance, as a lawyer would say," the colonel replied.

The three then proceeded to the office of the detective, which was only a short distance away.

It was on the second story in an office building, and when the party entered they found the detective waiting for them.

Robert Chutney, at the time of which we write, was universally recognized as one of the ablest men in the detective business in the Northwest.

He was a man of forty, or thereabouts, muscularly built, and with a firm, determined face.

A quiet, rather soft-spoken man, who, with his pleasant countenance fringed by a bushy brown beard and lit up by a pair of keen gray eyes, looked more like the proprietor of some stock ranch than the keenest man-hunter west of the Rocky Mountains.

Neither General Beeswing nor Judge Jones had ever met the detective, so Colonel Macarthy introduced the pair, and the man-hunter expressed his pleasure at making the acquaintance of two such distinguished gentlemen.

The governor proceeded at once to business. "I presume that Colonel Macarthy has enlightened you in regard to the situation," General Beeswing remarked.

"He gave me a general idea of the subject," the detective replied.

"Are you acquainted with the particulars of the case?" Judge Jones asked.

"Yes, I think so; that is if the accounts published in the daily newspapers can be relied upon," Chutney answered.

"The accounts were perfectly correct!" the governor declared. "The reporters interviewed all three of us, and as they were sharp fellows you can rest assured that they got all the details."

"Marshal Hendrix has been at work on the case for the last ten days," Judge Jones observed. "But, he has been obliged to keep the thing up, although in the beginning he felt perfectly confident that he would have very little trouble in nabbing the rascals."

The detective smiled.

"Yes, I knew that Marshal Hendrix had set to work to run the road-agents down, for he consulted me about the matter."

"He repeated to us that you said you did not care to go into the matter—you were too busy, and there was not money enough in the affair for you," the governor remarked.

"That is true, and I will say further to you, in confidence, gentlemen, that I did not care to do business with Hendrix, although the marshal is a friend of mine, and I haven't anything against him, but in a case of this kind he would expect me to do all the work, while he would try to grab the glory, and the cash, if it was a success."

The visitors nodded; they were satisfied that this view was correct.

"Now, a thousand dollars, gentlemen, isn't a very large sum of money and I did not feel that I could divide with Hendrix, for after paying expenses there would not be enough left to afford to give any one a share."

Again the others nodded.

"Then, I did not agree with his ideas about the matter," the detective explained. "It was my opinion that it would be no easy job to catch these outlaws; he thought differently, and I was quite willing to let him go ahead and try what he could do."

"It is his belief, now, that the gang has been disbanded and the men have fled, each in a different direction," General Beeswing remarked.

"What gives him that impression?" Chutney asked, evidently surprised.

"He argues that after making such a good haul from us, and knowing that we would be apt to kick up a big time about it, the fellows would come to the conclusion the country would be too hot to hold them."

"Nonsense!" the detective exclaimed. "The men only got about three hundred dollars apiece, and with rascals of their character three hundred doesn't amount to anything. Men of the stamp of these road-agents would get rid of a trifle like three hundred dollars in a single spree. If it was three thousand now, there might be some chance of their scattering."

"You think that the gang still exists?" the judge asked.

"I see no reason to believe that it does not," the man-hunter replied.

"Neither do I!" Colonel Macarthy exclaimed. "And I do not take any stock in Marshal Hendrix's supposition. In his case the wish was father to the thought. He could not find any traces of the outlaws, and so, in order to excuse himself—to give a good reason for his ill success, he declares that the men have fled from the Territory."

"Now, we three are in earnest about this matter," the colonel continued. "It is a personal one with us. We want these rascals captured and we have made up a purse of fifteen hundred dollars, which we are willing to pay to you, if you can succeed in running them down; this is three hundred dollars a man, and in addition, mind you, to the thousand dollars offered by the governor here in his public proclamation; then we will allow you a liberal sum for expenses in advance, no matter whether you catch the men or not."

"Well, gentlemen, I must say that your proposition is a liberal one, and I am willing to accept the job," Chutney replied, immediately.

"You think there is some chance, then, of catching the men?" exclaimed General Beeswing, eagerly.

"Oh, yes; this is not the first time I have heard of the Flour-sack Gang," the detective remarked. "They began operations about a year ago, but they were a hundred miles to the north of the trail where they held you gentlemen up. I have a man now in the region where I think this band have their headquarters. I did not send him up there to spy on these particular outlaws, but I received word from the East—from my correspondents in the detective line—that a certain man, for whom a big reward is offered, was supposed to have sought refuge in this region, and there is a certain lonely mining-camp, which would be just the place for a man like this one whom I want, to hide in, so I sent a spy to the town, and while posting him in regard to the Eastern fugitive, I warned him to keep his eyes open for traces of this Flour-sack Gang."

"You have the machinery all in order then?" Colonel Macarthy observed.

"Well, you may say that I have made a beginning," the detective replied.

"You will accept the commission?" the governor asked.

"Yes, and I will do the best I can to capture the fellows," Chutney answered.

"And you think there is a fair chance for success?" Judge Jones inquired.

"Oh, yes; the men have not fled from the Territory in my opinion, and I would be willing to make a good big bet that they are not fifty miles from the point where they relieved you gentlemen of your valuables!" the detective asserted, positively. "They undoubtedly have some refuge which they consider to be a safe one, and after they cleaned you out they sought shelter there, and there they will remain until this hue and cry blows over, then they will resume operations again. That is the way these gangs always operate, but, judging from what

I have heard of this band, they are a cut above the average."

"Well, the leader of the gang was the only one who spoke, and he seemed to be a rough, common fellow, if an opinion could be formed from his voice and the style of his conversation," the governor observed.

"Oh, no, you could not judge by that!" the detective replied, immediately. "In a case of this kind a man would do his best to disguise his voice, and if he was an educated fellow, anything of a gentleman, you know, it would be his game to appear rough, and ignorant, so as to baffle detection."

"There is no mistake about the fact that this road-agent leader is a man of unusual cunning and ability," Colonel Macarthy declared. "And I should not be at all surprised if he turned out to be a man of education. No mean, low, common fellow could have carried out this robbery with the skill and adroitness that this rascal displayed."

"It was well-planned, this attack, and excellently carried out!" the judge declared. "There were three of us in the coach, all well-armed, and if we had had the opportunity could have offered a stout resistance, but the thing was so well-planned that we had no more chance to offer successful resistance than if we had been so many schoolboys."

"It is always the game of these road-agents to make the assault in such a manner that the passengers will not have a chance to fight," the detective remarked. "These 'toll-collectors,' as they, with a fine sense of humor, style themselves, do not want to kill anybody. They would not be able to gain any more booty by shedding blood, and if they took life it would be apt to rouse the country, so they always try to arrange the attack in such a way that the people in the coach will see that it is useless to show fight."

"Well, success to you!" the governor exclaimed and then the three took their departure.

The detective bowed the visitors out, then he returned to his arm-chair, opened a drawer in the desk before which he sat, and took out a newspaper clipping, the account of the robbery.

Chutney read the article through carefully, then laid it upon the desk and fell to meditating.

He sat with his brows wrinkled by thought for a good ten minutes and then he struck the call-bell on the desk.

He listened for a moment, then struck the bell again, this time quite sharply.

The response which he expected did not come, and so, with a look of surprise, he rose and opened a door which led into an interior room, and there, on a sofa, fast asleep, lay a powerfully-built, dissipated appearing, yet good-looking man of thirty or thereabouts.

"Hello, George!" the detective exclaimed.

The man started up, rubbed his eyes and looked confused.

"What's up, eh?" he cried.

"I want you; that is all."

"Blessed if I have not been sound asleep!" the other remarked, yawning.

"So it seems."

"Well, I was up with a little poker-party about all last night," the man explained.

"And as I have been pretty busy during the day, I have not had a chance to get any rest," and he rose as he spoke, and followed Chutney into the front office.

"Sit down; I have a job for you," Chutney said, as he resumed his seat in the arm-chair.

The other complied with the request.

"Are you familiar with this road-agent business?" and he passed the newspaper clipping to the other.

The new-comer was known as George Haverland; he had been on the police force of Helena, and by the skill he displayed in capturing some bold and skillful law-breakers, had come to be regarded as having decided abilities in the detective line. Having difficulties with his officers, he had resigned from the police force and found employment with Bob Chutney, who would have regarded him as an extremely valuable man if it had not been so difficult to keep him straight, for Haverland was a hard drinker, and also much given to card-playing.

"Oh, yes," Haverland replied, as he cast his eyes over the account of the robbery. "I read of the affair at the time it happened, and I had a talk, too, with Marshal Hendrix about it. He went in to capture the robbers, you know."

The detective nodded.

"He wanted me to take a hand in the game," the other continued. "But I know Bill Hendrix like a book, and no man of his stamp can fool me for a cent! Besides, I owe him a grudge, on account of the old police business. If it had not been for him I never would have left the force. He worked against me in an underhand manner all the time. He does not think I am aware of that fact; but I am. And if I had gone into the thing, he would have expected me to do all the work; but you can bet all you are worth he would not have been willing to give me anything like a fair share of the reward, so I wouldn't join in with him."

"The governor has asked me to take the job, for Hendrix has thrown it up, not being able to

do anything with it," Chutney explained. "And in addition to the thousand dollars that General Beeswing offered in his published proclamation, the three who were robbed are willing to pay as much more to capture the road-agents."

"That is a good offer!"

"Yes, it is worth trying for, and I thought you might be able to do something with the case."

"Oh, I will go right at it!" Haverland announced. "Doing business with you is a different matter from going in with that rascal of a Hendrix! I can just tell you that I am not the man to put a dollar in his way!"

"I don't blame you," the detective remarked. "And now about this case," Haverland resumed. "Have you got anything to go on besides this newspaper account?"

"Well, not much," Chutney replied. "Only a few ideas of my own which may not amount to anything. I have had my eyes on this Flour-sack Gang ever since they began operations about a year ago, for I had a notion that they might fly at high game some time so as to give me a chance at them. Of course until somebody offered a good, big reward for the destruction of the gang there was no use of my troubling myself about them, as I am in this business for money and not for glory."

"Certainly, that is a sure enough fact!" Haverland declared. "Glory is all very well, but it does not give a man his bread and butter to say nothing of his whisky," and then the speaker grinned as though he thought he had made a witty remark.

"Old man, I don't want to lecture you, but you would be a deal better off if you would let whisky alone," the detective remarked, in a kindly way.

"Oh, that is all right!" Haverland declared, a little impatiently. "I am keeping as straight as a string now."

"I am glad of it!" Chutney declared. "I do not know a man in this section who could do one-half as well in the detective line as you, if you would only take care of yourself."

"Well, I am going to do it in future; I shall not make any more bad breaks; you can rest assured of that."

"Just you stick to it and you are a made man. But to return to our mutton. As I told you, I have been keeping an eye on this Flour-sack Gang ever since I first heard of them; they have operated to the north of the Big Belt Mountains, but within striking distance of that range, until this last operation, and from that fact I conjectured that it was likely their headquarters was situated somewhere in the Big Belt Range."

"Yes, that appears to be probable," the other observed, reflectively.

"And this last exploit, the scene of action being to the south of the Big Belt, yet within easy reaching distance of the mountains, confirms me in my impression."

"I reckon you have not made any mistake about the matter!" Haverland exclaimed, with an air of conviction.

"Now, the next question is—supposing that we consider it is settled that the gang have their headquarters somewhere in the Big Belt Mountains—whereabouts in the Big Belt country shall we look for the lurking place of the gang?"

"Ah, now you have arrived at a mighty difficult point!" the other declared, with a wise shake of the head. "There's a deal of country in the Big Belt Range."

"Well, from the facts in my possession I feel pretty certain that the gang are located on the eastern side of the range, and toward the northern part," Chutney remarked.

"That narrows the field considerably."

"Yes, it certainly does. Now, my experience with gangs of this kind, which only operate every now and then, two or three months perhaps between the times, is that they play honest citizens when not on the road. They are not like regular robber gangs who do nothing but plunder. These fellows, apparently, only strike when there is a chance to secure a good haul of booty."

"That is so," Haverland assented.

"I am well posted in regard to the country to the east of the Big Belt Range, as I have been through it a half-a-dozen times," the detective remarked. "There are only a few settlements, and none of them amount to anything, for although there is plenty of precious metals in that neighborhood, yet the stuff is so located that it takes about all it is worth to get hold of it."

"Yes, I know of eight or ten camps that have started in with a boom in that locality, but every one of them about has petered out."

"Yes, I only know of a few that have managed to hold on, and to one of them in particular my attention has been attracted as being a likely place for a gang like this Flour-sack band to take refuge," Chutney remarked. "It is a lonely camp situated away up in the mountains and bears about as hard a reputation as any town that I know of in Montana."

"Well, I am not posted in regard to that section," Haverland observed.

"This camp to which I refer is called Ricaree City, and is noted as being the home of

men who are fugitives from justice, and the place is located in so wild a region, and is so hard to get at, that no sheriff has ever yet dared to attempt to make an arrest there."

"I see. I have heard of such camps before. The inhabitants would fight like a lot of wild-cats if any effort was made to arrest a man in the town."

"Yes, for the majority of them are all in the same boat; and then the country in the neighborhood of the camp is so wild and rugged, that if the man who was pursued had a warning of the approach of the officers, so that he could secure an hour's start, the chances are a hundred to one that he could not be overtaken."

"Yes, and then it would cost a heap of money, too!" Haverland exclaimed. "Why, it would spoil the looks of two or three hundred dollars to make a trip up in a region like that with a force big enough to do anything."

"That is true, and unless the man who was wanted was of great importance no one would be likely to go to the expense."

"No, I should say not."

"You can see that such a camp as this would be just the one for a gang like the one we are after, to select for a headquarters."

"That is a fact."

"Now, my idea is for you to assume a disguise and go to this Ricaree City; give out that you have been obliged to cut and run from some Eastern point on account of having got into trouble; that will be a good excuse, you know, for your coming to the camp. The bloodhounds were in chase and you had to find some refuge where they would not be apt to discover you."

"Oh, don't you fear but what I will get up a tale which will fool the smartest of them!" Haverland declared, in a knowing way.

"Smithville is the nearest town, and I will make arrangements with a party there whom I can trust to look after my mail, so it will be easy for you to run over to Smithville and make your reports. Just drop a letter in the post-office there addressed to Robert Ney, Smithville, and my agent will look after it, for as I shall be on the go pretty much during the next month, if you sent your letters here there might be a delay in my getting them, for I am going to White Sulphur Springs, and then up to the north, to the east of Ricaree City, and the letters, if they came here, would have to just double back on the route, while I can post my Smithville agent so that he can forward directly to me."

"All right! You can depend upon my smelling out the game if they are up in that region."

"You will need some money for expenses," the detective said, producing his wallet.

"Oh, no, I am all right; I am well heeled!" and Haverland pulled out a big roll of bills, which he flourished in a triumphant fashion.

Chutney looked amazed.

"Well, you certainly are in funds!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, you can bet your sweet life that I did not play poker all last night for nothing!"

"Fortune evidently favored you."

"Oh, I played in big luck!"

"There is nothing more to be said, as far as I can see," the detective observed, reflectively.

"If you can't find any traces of the Flour-sack Gang in Ricaree City, you might try some of the other camps in that region."

"I will! But I say, wouldn't it be a good idea to put another man on with me?" Haverland suggested.

"Another man?" Chutney asked, in surprise.

"Yes; don't you think that two men would do better than one?"

"Oh, no, I hardly think so, and then I don't know any one who would fill the bill just at present."

"Well, the idea occurred to me, and so I thought I would mention it."

"That is all right, of course, I am glad you did. I always welcome suggestions from a man like yourself even if I am not able to act on them."

"You can expect to hear from me in a week or so!" Haverland declared, and then he took his departure.

Chutney looked after him for a few moments, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"I have not anything to go on, of course, but my instinct tells me that there is something wrong here," he said, after turning the matter over in his mind for quite a while.

"What suggested the putting on of another man to him? Is it possible that he was playing possum, and was not sleeping soundly when I called him?"

"I mentioned to the governor that I had already put a man on the case. Did he overhear me say that, and was his suggestion that I put on another man intended to draw me out—to induce me to tell him that there was an agent of mine already in Ricaree City?"

"It has a mighty suspicious look!" the detective exclaimed after a pause, and with a decided shake of the head. "And the more I think of it, the greater becomes my impression that there is something wrong about the matter."

"And the big roll of bills too that he showed. I doubt if he got that roll in a poker game, for he is a notoriously poor player, and is generally

fleece by the card-sharps, for gambling is his pet weakness, and he is not half as good a gamester as he believes himself to be."

"What then is the solution of this riddle?"

And the detective pondered long over the question.

"Is the Flour-sack Gang right here in Helena, and have they bought up Haverland so as to be on their guard against any attempt to detect them? Upon my word, it looks like it!"

"I think I will have to take an active part in this affair myself. Set a thief to catch a thief, and employ one detective to watch another! If Haverland has sold me out I will make it cost him dearly!"

And the way that Chutney uttered the sentence proved that he meant what he said.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOLD OUT.

WHEN Haverland reached the street after leaving the detective's office, he chuckled in a way which indicated that he felt decidedly jolly.

"I reckon that I did that job up in first-class style!" he muttered as he proceeded down the street. "Bob Chutney is about as smart as they make 'em—that is, in his own opinion," he added with a sneer, "but I reckon I am a leetle ahead of him on this beat!"

And now Haverland laughed outright.

"Smart as he is, I have got the deadwood on him this time, and no mistake!"

As he uttered this boast he turned aside from the main avenue and proceeded down a narrow side street, but after going on for fifty feet he suddenly darted into a dark doorway.

Concealed in the shadows he waited.

"I never take any chances in a thing of this kind," he muttered. "I think I have succeeded in fooling Chutney in the most complete manner, but there is no telling. He may have smelt a mouse; and if so the odds are big that he will put a shadow on my track—maybe he might do a little of the spy act on his own account, but neither he nor the smartest shadow that ever tracked a man will be able to follow me!"

For a good ten minutes Haverland remained hidden in the doorway, but his suspicions were not verified.

He was not followed—no spy was on his track.

When he thought sufficient time had elapsed he came forth from his hiding-place and proceeded on his way.

But in order to "make assurance doubly sure" he turned twice on his tracks, so that even the cleverest spy would have been baffled, and took a most roundabout course to his objective point, which was a small saloon on the outskirts of the town, a noted resort for men whose characters were not good.

At the back of the saloon were three small rooms fitted up for the accommodation of card-parties, and many a "pigeon" had been enticed into one of these apartments, plied with drugged liquor and then cheated out of his money.

Haverland nodded in a familiar way to the barkeeper as he entered, and inquired:

"Any one been asking for me?"

"Yes, there is a party in the first room," the barkeeper answered.

The detective proceeded to the apartment indicated. In it sat a roughly-dressed man, with long black hair which hung down to his neck, cowboy fashion, and a swarthy face, the lower part of which was covered with a short, thick, black beard.

He nodded as Haverland entered.

The detective closed the door carefully behind him and took a seat on the opposite side of the table from where the stranger sat.

"Been waiting long?" Haverland asked.

"No, only about half an hour."

"Well, I came as soon as I could."

"Any news?"

"Yes, at last, but I suppose you have got about tired of waiting?"

"Oh, no, I am patient. Besides there is no sense in a man worrying himself about an affair of this kind, for all the worry in the world will not push the affair forward. All there is to it is for a man to wait until things develop themselves."

"That is just what they did to-night," Haverland remarked. "Your guess that Bob Chutney would be brought into the matter was correct."

"Well, it did not require a man to be much of a prophet to guess that," the other replied.

"That is so, for Chutney is about the only man in the town who makes a specialty of business in the detective line, and anybody who knows what Marshal Hendrix is could tell right in the beginning that he would not be able to do anything."

"That was my calculation, and when the marshal threw the case up I reckoned the governor would be apt to apply to Chutney."

"Well, things worked just that way," Haverland remarked. "Chutney sent word for me to come up to the office early in the evening, and when I got there he told me that he expected to have a job which he wanted me to take hold of, and said I could wait in the inner office, as he expected the parties to call in a short time, so I went into the room and sat down to wait. In just about twenty minutes the parties came in;

there was General Beeswing, the governor, you know, Judge Jefferson Jones and Colonel McCarthy."

"The three that I expected," the stranger observed.

"Yes, I was on the watch, and when the party entered the room I took advantage of the noise they made to open the door and shove a bit of folded paper in the crack near the bottom of it, so I could hear every word that was said."

"That was a smart trick," the other declared.

"Oh, yes, I was not born yesterday," Haverland remarked, with a deal of complacency.

"The governor wanted Chutney to undertake to hunt down the Flour sack Gang, explaining that Marshal Hendrix had give the thing up as a bad job, and as an inducement said he would pay fifteen hundred dollars in addition to the thousand which he had already offered."

The other gave vent to a low whistle of surprise.

"Twenty-five hundred dollars, eh?" cried the stranger.

"That is the exact sum."

"Why, that is five hundred dollars apiece for the five men."

"Correct!"

"Say, you could make a better thing of it to go in to capture the men than to act with me," the stranger suggested, with a harsh laugh.

"Yes, if I could collar the reward I could, undoubtedly!" Haverland declared. "But this offer was not made to me, it was to Bob Chutney, you understand!"

"Ah, yes, and even if you did all the work, Chutney would take half the reward," the other observed, thoughtfully.

"You bet!" Haverland declared. "And I feel just this way about the matter: I would rather slip up on the reward myself than let him have the lion's share."

"Well, that is only natural."

"I heard the whole of the conversation. Chutney told the party that he had had his eyes on the Flour-sack Gang for some time, that he suspected they had their headquarters in a certain town, and he had a spy in that town on the watch for information."

"You told me the last time I met you that you had a suspicion Chutney was up to some game of the kind."

"Yes, I remember that I did, and the way I happen to suspect that something of the sort was going on was because Bob Chutney asked me if I could recommend any man for a job of that kind. I was busy at the time and could not go myself."

"You think he got a man then?"

"Yes, he told the governor that he had his man on the ground."

"Did he mention the name of the town?"

"I don't think he did to the governor," the detective replied, reflecting upon the matter. "I am not sure, but to the best of my recollection he did not. He did to me though, afterwards."

"When the party cleared out I slipped the paper of the crack, closed the door, and when Chutney summoned me he found a gentleman about my size sound asleep upon the lounge in the room," and then Haverland indulged in a hearty laugh.

"You worked the game right up to the handle!" the stranger declared, admiringly.

"Well, now, you better believe I did! Well, to make a long story short, Chutney told me what the game was and wanted me to go into it."

"And you consented."

"You bet! Bob was pleased to tell me that I was a good man, but would be a better one if I would only leave whisky alone!" and Haverland's voice was full of scorn.

"What business was it of his?"

"None at all! but he had to ring in a little temperance lecture just to let me see that he was on to my little weakness."

"He had better look after his own!" the other declared.

"Right you are! But I will get square with the bold Bob for his lecture before I get through with him!" the detective declared.

"Well, to come right to the point, I accepted the commission, and I am to go in disguise to a mining-camp in the Big Belt Range known as Ricaree City," and Haverland fixed a questioning look on the stranger as he spoke.

"How is that, old man; is he anywhere near the truth?"

"Not far out of the way, for a fact!" the other admitted.

"Well, I reckon he wasn't!" Haverland observed. "For to give the devil his due, Bob Chutney has a pretty keen nose for scenting out the trail in a matter of this sort."

"He suspects that the Flour-sack Gang have their headquarters in the neighborhood of Ricaree City and I am to go there in disguise."

"But I reckon that you will not be able to find any traces of them?" the stranger observed with a knowing smile.

"No, I reckon not," and Haverland grinned.

The stranger produced a roll of bills and counted out a hundred dollars which he pushed over to the detective.

"Well, really now, I didn't expect this, for you staked me handsomely in the first place,"

but he fingered the money with a loving hand as he spoke.

"Oh, that is all right. Take it to feed the birds with!"

And here the conference ended.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PLOT.

AND now the scene changes and we transport the reader to the mining-camp of Ricaree City again.

A week has elapsed since the dashing rancher, the Cowboy Dude, told his soft tale and was rejected by Big John Valentine's daughter.

Since that day Gilbert Featherstone had not been seen in the town.

The landlord wondered at his absence, but upon questioning some of the cowboys of the One-Square Ranch, found that the proprietor had not returned from his trip to the north.

Valentine had tried on a couple of occasions to persuade his daughter that she was acting very foolishly in not accepting the suit of the rancher, but he found that Blanche was as firm as a rock upon the subject.

"Under no circumstances would I become that man's wife!" she declared.

The father lost his temper and reproached his daughter in the bitterest manner, but she retorted fully as hotly.

"I can go out in the world and earn my own living!" she declared. And she further added that she was extremely sorry she had not done so before coming to Ricaree City.

Valentine grew alarmed and cooled down when he found that the girl was resolute.

As far as the hotel and restaurant went, he knew that he could not possibly get along without the girl's assistance.

Aided only by a Chinaman she did all the work, and he knew he would have to shut up shop if Blanche departed.

True, the hotel was not particularly profitable, still he did not want to close it up, and then, too, he was afraid that if the girl departed while Featherstone was gone the rancher would be apt to kick up a row and blame him for the occurrence when he returned.

"All right; you need not get so angry about the thing," Valentine said, in conclusion. "It is you who ought to decide about the matter, of course, and if you will not have the man, why, that settles it."

The day after the rancher's return he called upon Big John Valentine, and the landlord reported to him the trouble he had had with the girl.

"She is as obstinate as a mule!" the rancher exclaimed.

"She is, indeed!" Valentine assented. "I stopped talking about the matter, for I was afraid that she would clear out for good, and then all the fat would be in the fire."

The two were in the saloon, had taken seats by the further end of the bar, and as there were no customers present they had the place to themselves, and could converse freely without danger of being overheard, if they were careful to speak in a moderate tone.

"Yes, that is true enough," Featherstone replied.

"It would materially interfere with our plans if the girl should clear out, but I don't think there is much danger of that, for I have an idea that she is struck after this gambler—this Keen Billy."

"Oh, no, I don't think so!" the old man declared.

"Have you kept your eyes open to see whether the pair have met or not?" Featherstone asked.

"Well, the man drops in here nearly every evening, just as the rest of the fellows do," Valentine observed, reflectively. "But he doesn't get any chance to see Blanche then."

"Yes, but if he comes here for his meals he would see her."

"He comes in for his dinner once in a while, not regular, you know, every other day, maybe."

"Do you think he has come any oftener during this past week than he used to do?" the rancher asked.

Big John Valentine thought over the matter for a moment, and then shook his head.

"No, I don't reckon that he has come any oftener."

"But that is no sign, though, any way!" Featherstone exclaimed, impatiently. "He need not come here to see her, for if she goes out riding, or walking, the pair could easily arrange to meet somewhere outside of the town."

"Well, the girl has not gone out any more than usual!" the father declared. "And Blanche is so infernally independent that if she wanted to meet the fellow she would not be apt to hesitate to do it right before the eyes of the whole town."

"That may be so, and then again it may not be," Featherstone observed. "These girls are queer customers, and a man never can tell how to take them. She knows that this man is a gambler and with her Eastern ideas she may shrink from letting people know that she has taken a fancy to him."

"Yes, but do you really think she has?" Valentine exclaimed, quickly. "You know there may be no foundation for that idea."

"That is true, but it is my suspicion that there is something between the two, and as a rule I am not very far wrong in my guesses."

"He saved her life, I know," the landlord observed, thoughtfully. "But then it does not always follow that a girl falls in love with a man even if he has done a thing of that kind."

"Well, it is not of any use for us to waste time in discussing the subject!" Featherstone observed. "It does not matter whether she has fallen in love with this gambler or not. One thing is certain: she has not fallen in love with me, and that is the point I am interested about."

"That is true."

"I have been away a little longer than I expected, but I have kept my mind busy on this subject, all the same, and now if you are game to go in with me so that I can secure your daughter I will make it worth your while," the rancher observed.

"Of course I will do all in my power to aid you!" the landlord declared. "I should be the biggest kind of a fool if I allowed the whims and fancies of a girl, who don't know when she is well off, to stand between me and prosperity!"

"That is where your head is level!" the other exclaimed. "I am not the man, you know, to care for a bit of money when my heart is set upon a thing!"

"Oh, I understand that!" Valentine asserted. "And you are lucky enough to have plenty of cash, so that you can back your notion with the solid stuff!"

"Yes, and I am just the man to do it too! Now, Valentine, I will make you a good, square offer: you help me to get Blanche and I will pay you a thousand dollars, cash down on the nail!"

The watery eyes of Big John Valentine glistened as this tempting offer fell upon his ears. He had not expected that the rancher would be one-half as liberal.

"One thousand dollars, eh?" he exclaimed in a tone which fully expressed his delight at the offer.

"Yes, that is the sum. I want to offer you enough so as to make it an object for you to help me in this matter."

"Oh, that is perfectly satisfactory!" the old man hastened to exclaim. "I will admit that I did not expect you would come down so handsomely!"

"I can afford it!" the rancher responded with the air of a prince. "I am not going to stand on a few hundred dollars with a man like yourself!"

"I will do all I can for you; you can depend upon that!" Valentine declared. "But how do you propose to work the game?"

The rancher cast a careful glance around, so as to be sure that there was no one near to overhear his words, then he drew his chair a little nearer to Valentine and said, dropping his voice almost to a whisper:

"You know Parson John, one of my cowboys?"

"Yes; about the biggest drunkard and gambler that you have got on your place. It is a wonder to the boys why you keep such a fellow."

"Ah, he is like a singed cat, he is a deal better than he appears to be," Featherstone replied.

"Maybe so," the landlord responded, in a doubtful way. "But it is the general impression in the camp that he is one of the hardest cases that ever struck the town."

"Well, you see, you folks down here only see the worst side of the man's character," the rancher declared. "He seldom comes to the camp, except when he is on a spree, and when he gets off on a time, he is a terror, I know."

"You bet!" the landlord exclaimed. "And I tell you what it is, some of the men in the camp will clinch him some time, for the boys don't like the way he goes crowing round that he is the boss fighter of the Ricaree Valley, and can chew up any man in the camp."

"Well, any one who tries him on will find that he is a hard nut to crack!" Featherstone asserted.

"But to come back to what I was going to say: he is called Parson John, you know."

"Yes, I s'pose that is because he always goes smoothly shaven, and wears nothing but black; is particular, too, to have on a b'iled shirt when he dresses up, although he isn't anything but a common cowboy; and then the way he can sling conversation around is a caution. Why, he can make a speech equal to any lawyer that I ever came across!"

"Oh, yes, there isn't any mistake about that. He is a man of education, and really entitled to the name he bears."

"You don't mean to say that he has been a parson?" Valentine exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Not only has been, but he is one now," the rancher declared.

"You don't mean it?"

"It is a fact! no mistake about it!" Featherstone replied. "He has never been unfrocked, as the saying is—that is, never deposed from the ministry."

"Well, Parson John is a healthy minister, I must say!"

"Yes, the wildest, devil-may-care cowboy on my ranch is a minister in good standing."

"I don't understand how that can be?" Valentine exclaimed, puzzled.

"The explanation is simple enough. His father was a minister and he was educated for the same calling—he is a college-bred man, and in due time he got a church in a small town. He was always inclined to go off on sprees at irregular intervals, but when he felt one of these fits coming on he had sense enough to make some excuse so as to get off, then he hurried to a big city and went in to paint the town red."

"It was a wonder that he wasn't found out!" Valentine declared.

"He never was, as it happened, but on one of these sprees he chanced to get into a row in a low drinking saloon and in the fight a man was killed. The presumption is that the parson is responsible for his death, although he will not admit it, but he acknowledges that the evidence pointed so strongly to him that he did not dare to remain and face it out, and as he was afraid of being traced if he went back to the village where his church was located he fled to the West and became a cowboy."

"Yes, and as wild a devil as can be scared up anywhere!" the landlord declared.

"That is so," the rancher assented. "Well, that is the story of Parson John. The mysterious disappearance of the young minister created a deal of wonder in the little town where he had preached, and he had the pleasure of reading the comments, that the affair excited, in the columns of the Eastern newspapers which he procured in the West. He was supposed to have fallen a victim to the thugs of the great city, or else to have been seized by a sudden fit of insanity, during which he had wandered away."

"And no one suspected the truth?"

"Not a soul, apparently, or if any one did the fact was never made public. So you see Parson John is still a minister in good standing, and can tie the marriage knot as hard and fast as any dominie in the world."

"I reckon I see what you are driving at," Big John Valentine observed. "If we can contrive to get Blanche up to your ranch, Parson John can marry you to her."

"Yes, that is my calculation."

"I do not believe though that you will be able to get her to agree to it," the father observed with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Well, Parson John is not the kind of a man to be particular about a little thing of that kind!" the rancher declared, coolly. "He will tie the knot all right whether the girl is willing, or the contrary. She will be up there on my ranch, completely in my power, and I don't see how she is going to help herself."

"That is a fact," the landlord admitted. "And it seems to me the chances are big that when she finds she is helpless she will come to the conclusion that she had better make the best of it."

"That is my idea!" Featherstone declared.

"The only difficult thing about the matter, as far as I can see, will be getting her to your place," Valentine observed, thoughtfully.

"Well, my idea was to work the Black-cap business on her, just about the same as we did on Old Benzine; it was a failure, by the way, as far as he was concerned. I was warned, you know, that he was a detective spy who came here on purpose to locate one of my men, but I reckon we got hold of the wrong man for we couldn't get anything out of him."

"No, I don't think there is any harm in the fellow," the landlord observed. "He is only dangerous to the whisky, but he can get away with a lot of that."

"This Black-cap business will work. I will think the matter over and arrange a plan. There is no hurry about the matter, you know. Give the girl time to come to the conclusion that I have given up the chase and then she will be off her guard."

Valentine remarked that this was a good idea.

A few unimportant words were exchanged and then the rancher departed.

CHAPTER XIX.

A VISITOR.

KEEN BILLY sat on a rock in front of his cabin, sunning himself, and enjoying the pleasure of a smoke.

Deep lines of thought were written on his brow, and it was plain that his mind was wrestling with a problem which puzzled him.

At last he took the briar-wood pipe from his lips and rested it upon his knee.

"This is a very difficult matter," he murmured, "and the more I consider it the greater I am perplexed. 'To be or not to be,' as I heard the hero in a play say once."

"This girl is pretty—educated and accomplished, although she is not very well situated just at present, and, in my opinion, has a rascal for a father."

"I know the old man suspects that I am after his daughter, from the way he looks at me

lately, and I am inclined to think that he does not like it."

"It is equally plain to me from the brief interview that I had with this Cowboy Dude on the day the mountain lion incident occurred, that he is after the girl and is inclined to look upon me in the light of a rival; if I had not been ready for him on that occasion he would have undoubtedly have settled my account as far as this world is concerned."

"Now it is solely because he thinks I am after the girl that he troubled himself about me. He has never condescended to notice my existence before." And the sport indulged in a hearty laugh.

"Now the question before the meeting is, first, do I really care anything for this girl; second, is there any chance for me to win her; third, had I ought to try for the prize if I conclude there is a chance?"

The sharp allowed his eyes to wander vacantly over the landscape as he pondered upon the subject, and it was a good ten minutes before he spoke.

"I am sure that I like the girl better than any woman that I have ever seen; there is something about her that has touched a chord in my heart which no woman ever caused to vibrate before, and from the way she has treated me I think that I stand a good chance to win her if I make the effort, and now comes the most important question of all: ought I to make the attempt?"

"Ah, there is the rub!" and the sport shook his head soberly.

"If I win the girl she trusts her life's happiness in my hands. It rests with me to make or mar her existence."

"Now then, what are the chances?"

"The girl is not favored by fortune now, but she certainly will not improve her position any by becoming the wife of a man who depends upon his skill as a gambler for his living."

And again the sport shook his head very soberly.

"One thing is certain!" he exclaimed. "If I go in to win the girl I must make up my mind to give up gambling. I must find some other way of making a living, and that ought not to be a difficult matter, when it is considered that I have a fair amount of capital to back me. The life is not an agreeable one, anyway, and I shall not be sorry to get out of it."

"Another point to be considered. If I marry the girl and go into another kind of life I must get out of this camp, for there isn't any opening here for me; until I be safe from the enemies who seek my blood if I go elsewhere?"

The sport pondered over this question for a few moments.

"Yes, by going down to the southward—to New Mexico, say," he remarked, his face lighting up as though he considered that he had arrived at the solution of the problem.

"In a new country like that, there are always plenty of chances for an enterprising man with a little capital at his back. I am a good judge of stock, and I have no doubt I could do well if I took a ranch, and the chances that my enemies will be able to follow and annoy me down there are so small as hardly to be worth calculating."

"That is my game!" And the sport spoke with firm decision now.

"I will go in and do my best to win the girl! I shall probably have to fight this Cowboy Dude and his gang when he discovers what I am up to, but I am not without friends in yonder camp, and there are plenty of men there too, who don't admire Featherstone, and they will see that I get fair play, even if they refrain from taking an active part to help me."

"There are five or six good men whom I can count on though, and with their aid I think I can give the cowboys all the fight they want if their boss brings on a difficulty, and it is dollars to cents that he will try to play a game of that kind if he makes up his mind that I am after the girl and stand any chance to get her."

At this point the attention of the sport was attracted to a man who was approaching up the narrow trail which led to the lonely cabin.

"Hello! that is my fat friend, Joe Bowers, or Old Benzine, as almost everybody in the town calls him on account of the enormous swallow he has for liquor."

It was indeed the veteran bummer, and when he arrived at a place where he could command a good view of the sport, seated upon the rock, he halted for a moment and waved his hand in a friendly way; the sport replied to the salutation and then Bowers came on again.

When he arrived at the little level space before the cabin he made a most elaborate bow.

"Hail, mighty satrap!" he exclaimed, in his ridiculous theatrical way. "How do you sagacitate?"

"Pretty well, I reckon; how are you?" the sport replied.

"Well, I am able to eat, and I haven't had to go back on my licker yet!" Bowers responded with a grin.

"That is good! Sit down and make yourself comfortable," and Keene waved his hand to a rock which cropped out of the earth a yard or so from the one on which he sat.

"I am yours to command! Squat-a-vo-lal!

Excuse my French," the veteran remarked as he seated himself upon the rock.

"How do you like Ricaree City as far as you have got?" Keene inquired.

"Me noble dook, it is a leetle slow," Bowers replied with a solemn shake of the head.

"Well, the boom has ended; there is no doubt of that."

"Thar is a graveyard quietness about this hyer town which is conducive to sad reflection, but not to wealth," the veteran remarked with a deal of pathos in his voice.

"You are about right, I reckon."

"Yes, Ricaree City is a nice, quiet place," Bowers observed, reflectively. "I have been in quieter places in my time—graveyards and sich like, but I can't say that I banker arter quite so much peace."

The sport laughed.

"It is a dead-and-alive place! About the only time there is any stir is when the cowboys come in."

"Do they bring much wealth with them?" the veteran inquired in an anxious way.

"Oh, yes!" the sport replied. "There is only one gang of cowboys that come to the camp, you know, the men on the One-Square Ranch."

"Featherstone's place—the Cowboy Dude, as they call him."

"Yes. I reckon he must pay his hands pretty well, for some of his men seemed to have a deal of money."

"That is kinder queer," Bowers remarked. "For these cowboys don't usually git very big wages."

"Well, there is only a few of them who seemed to be so flush; three or four, maybe, but I have known them to have two or three hundred apiece."

"Oh, you don't say so?" Bowers exclaimed.

"Yes, it is a fact," Keene replied. "I know I am right about the thing and that there isn't any mistake about the matter, for I have had the good luck to clean out some of these fellows, and one particular night, I remember, that I won from a couple of them a trifle over six hundred dollars."

"Ah, that was a haul, me noble dook, worth the making!" the veteran exclaimed with glistening eyes. "Would I had been thar, so I could have had a chance for my white alley!"

"Well, about every time the cowboys come in for a time I succeed in getting three or four hundred dollars out of them," the sport observed. "In fact, I might say that if it wasn't for the cowboys I should be obliged to emigrate, for I could hardly make a living out of the miners. They are good men, the most of them, you understand, and the great majority of the boys have the richest kind of sporting blood in their veins, but they have not got the money to back their game."

"Oh, you bet I understand the situation! I hain't been cruising 'round the camp the past week for nothing!"

"Of course, a man in my line of business ought not to be troubled with such a thing as a conscience," the sport observed in a reflective way.

"Oh, no, sich an article is mighty inconvenient sometimes!" Joe Bowers declared, with a solemn wag of the head.

"Well, I have found it so, for I have a conscience and it bothers me sometimes," Keene announced, gravely. "I am a hawk; it is my business to go for pigeons, and I ought not to concern myself whether the pigeons are fat or lean, whether they are lonely bachelor pigeons or fathers with wives and children depending upon them."

"That is a fact. All that a true card-sharp ought to know is that the men who sit down to a game with him are arter his money and will do their level best to win it."

"And so he ought to go for them without fear or favor."

"You bet! That is the game!"

"Yes, I know it, but I can't work the trick in that way!" the sport declared.

"You see, I know just about what these miners are making," he continued. "The claims are panning out from two dollars to four dollars a day per man, and the majority of the workmen come much nearer two dollars than four, and they have to work hard for their money, too."

"Oh, yes, this gulch mining is no joke, I kin tell you!" the veteran declared. "I have done my share of it, and you kin bet all you are worth that when a man is only making day's wages at it he works mighty hard for every cent he gits."

"That is my opinion, exactly, and I tell you, old man, it goes against my grain to sit down on Saturday night, and in an hour or two win the money that these men have worked hard for six days to gain," Keene declared, earnestly.

"Ah, thar is whar your conscience comes in, and, pard, it is a big pull-back to a man in your business."

"Oh, yes, you are right there, and I feel as if I wasn't doing right if I happen to know that the men with whom I am playing have families for whose sake they ought to save their money."

"Well, if you did not skin them, somebody else would be apt to, you know," the veteran observed with the air of a philosopher.

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that!" the sport exclaimed, impatiently. "That is the style of reasoning that a man always employs when he knows that what he is doing is not right, and is anxious to find some excuse for it, but that sort of thing does not satisfy me at all. I know I ought not to win the money that the wives and children need—I know the men ought not to play and lose it, for they cannot really afford to indulge in any such luxury."

"Well, you need not play with them," Bowers observed, after turning the matter over in his mind for a moment. "But then that would not prevent them from losing their money, for when a man wants to gamble, he kin allers find plenty to play with him, particularly in a camp like this."

"Oh, I am aware of that, and lately I have been putting up a little job on some of these men who will play cards when they ought not to, which has worked like a charm," the sport declared.

"How is that?" the veteran exclaimed, his curiosity excited by this declaration.

"My plan is simple enough. I am always ready to play with the men when they are eager for a game, and never grumble no matter how high they want to make the stakes, and as I am a hundred per cent. better player than any of them, I contrive to arrange the matter so that the men who can't afford to lose, do not suffer much."

"I see! you throw the game their way," the other remarked. "It is a fine scheme, but it is not business."

"Oh, I know that; it is only amusement, and helps to pass away the time," the sport replied. "If it was not for the cowboys, I could not make a living in the camp."

"The thing does you honor, me noble dook, but it is a kind of waste of time, all the same! But from what I have seen of the town during my short sojourn here, I reckon you are right 'bout it's being a poor place for sports. The first night I was here I did pretty well. The boys reckoned, I guess, that they had got hold of a flat from Flatville, and they went in to skin me. Now that was just the kind of picnic that I liked, and so I jest hustled for all I was worth, but I reckon I must have given 'em an awful scare that night, for I hain't been able to do anything since."

"There isn't much gambling going on now," the sport observed. "You see, it is as I tell you, the boys are poor. There are a few of them that are anxious to tackle me once in a while for they have a notion that I am possessed of wealth galore, and they fancy that if they could get me into a big game, with luck running their way, they could make a stake worth having."

"Yes, I understand," the veteran observed with a wise look and a potent shake of the head. "These galoots hain't diskivered how true the old saying is, that it is a mighty unsafe thing for to try to beat a man at his own game."

"That is true enough, but the majority of the people in this world are very slow to recognize the truth of that," the sport observed.

"By the way, speaking of these cowboys, how often is it that they come into the camp, laden with wealth?" Joe Bowers asked. "Once a month, I s'pose when they are paid off, hey?"

"Well, I never took any particular notice about that," Keene replied. "But come to think about it, they are in the town oftener than once a month, every other week or so, I should say. I suppose that they do not have any regular pay-day, but get their money when they want it. I never heard any of them say anything about a pay-day."

"And a few of them have a deal more money than the rest?"

"Yes, there are always two or three, perhaps four, who are particularly well-beeled in a financial way."

"Melbe the boys gamble up at the ranch and these galoots win their comrades' money?" Joe Bowers suggested.

"Yes, that was the way I accounted for the thing, and yet it does not seem to be quite right either, for these men who have the money are not as good players as the ones who are not so flush. I play with all of them, you know, so I am a good judge as far as that goes."

"Is there anything crooked about the business, do you think?" the veteran inquired, with a knowing wink.

"I thought of that, too, for as I have a deal of idle time on my hands, I have nothing better to do than to speculate on what goes on around me. But I don't exactly see where the crooked business could come in. Most certainly there is nothing of the kind going on up in this region."

"Some of the galoots might be doing a little road-agent business on the roads to the north or south of the mountains."

"There is a chance of that, of course, but I don't think that it is very probable."

"Well, pard, now I have got something particular to say to you, and I want you to brace yourself for to listen!" the veteran declared, in an impressive way, after quite a pause.

"All right! go ahead as soon as you like! I am braced!" Keene replied.

CHAPTER XX.

BOWERS'S STORY.

"WELL, as I was saying to you, I struck it pretty rich on the first night I spent in the town, and I reckon from the way the thing began that I had the softest kind of a snap, but this hyer is an uncertain world, and you can't 'most always, generally, certainly tell how things are going to pan out," the veteran remarked.

"You are hitting the bull's-eye now every time!" the sport declared.

"Oh, yes, you hear me; it is my horn that is a-blowing!" Joe Bowers exclaimed.

"Well, as I war sayin, it did not take me long to find out that this hyer camp was not one of the places where a man 'bout my size could expect to live on quail and toast, and without having to work hard either."

"That is true. The man who indulges in any luxuries in this camp of Ricaree has got to hustle mighty lively."

"I wasn't afeared but what I could pick up enough to get my grub, but my roosting-place troubled me. That shark of a landlord wants five dollars a week for a room, and that was more than I could stand."

"You could make a better arrangement than that with some fellow who had a cabin big enough to put in an extra bunk," the sport observed.

"Yes, I know that. Oh, you kin bet that I calculated all the chances!" the veteran declared. "But this hyer cabin business I don't like. I am a solitary bird, one of the kind what likes to gather all by himself, you know, and I don't like to share my roosting-place with anybody, for I want to be free to come and go without being obliged to answer any questions."

"Yes, I can understand that. I should not like to be called upon to give an account of my movements either."

"Thar's a leetle tumble-down shop built right ag'in' the north wall of the hotel?"

"Yes, a shoemaker put that up, and he did right well there for a while until he got to drinking, and one night, in a spree, he hung himself in the shop."

"And his ghost haunts it, of course!" Joe Bowers exclaimed, with a grin.

"So the yarn goes, but I for one don't take much stock in ghosts," the sport remarked. "I have been by the place at all hours of the night, and I never saw anything out of the way."

"You did not hear the cobbler tapping away with his hammer?"

"Nary time!"

"And yet there are plenty of sensible, two-legged critters in this hyer camp who will tell you that they have heered the shoemaker working away in the dead hours of the night, and some of the galoots will swear that they have heered moans of pain coming from the house when they were going by jest after midnight."

"Yes, the ghost of the shoemaker going through the hanging business."

"And you don't take any stock in these hyer blood-curdling tales?"

"No, I don't!" the sport replied. "You see I am a night-bird, anyway, my business keeping me out late, so I seldom start for home, when things are running at all briskly, until the wee, small hours of the morning, and if there are any ghosts traveling around loose I think I would stand a good chance to see them as the next man."

"Cert! that is good, sound, solid, boss-sense every time!" the veteran declared, with the air of a sage. "And you never struck a ghost yet?"

"Nary one."

"I reckon I am in the same fix, although, pard, I have gone clean out of my way to run across a real, genuine spook."

"There may be something of the kind, but I doubt it, although I have heard men tell some awful yarns about the ghosts they have seen."

"And I s'pose 'bout that time you think of what that ancient sharp, Solomon, said 'bout all men being liars?" the veteran observed.

"Yes, when I hear a man spread himself on a ghost story, I set him down as a champion liar," the sport declared.

"I reckon that you ain't very far from the northwest side of the truth," Joe Bowers remarked, with a grin. "But I have heered a dozen of men in this hyer camp swear that they have heered the ghost of the shoemaker at work, and a few are sart'in that they have heered awful groans coming from the old shanty."

"Oh, I have heard the voices," the sharp replied. "But I was not fool enough to believe that an unquiet spirit had anything to do with the matter. The old place is all out of repair, and on the nights when I heard the noises the wind was high, and it was a natural conclusion that the wind was responsible for the noises. A loose board moving up and down would give a pretty correct representation of the noise of the hammer, and the creaking of a beam might lead a superstitious man to imagine he heard ghostly groans."

"Well, now, you would be safe in betting a big stake that you have got that down as fine as fine kin be!" the veteran exclaimed. "I am like you, I don't take no stock in ghosts, and the moment I heered the yarn of this hyer haunted

shanty, I made up my mind that that air place was jest the roost for me."

"That was a brilliant idea!" the sport declared.

"I reckon that it was pretty good," Joe Bowers observed, modestly. "You see, I calculated that I wouldn't have any rent to pay, unless the ghost put in an appearance, and if he was any kind of a reasonable ghost, I reckon I could stand him off, and git him to hang the thing up—tell him I would 'suar' the account when I went into the ghost business myself."

"A reasonable, business-like proposition," the sport remarked, gravely.

"I reckoned so! At the back of the shop is the woodshed of the hotel, and that j'ines the corral, so that a feller could skirmish 'round and git into the shanty without much danger of anybody seeing him, if he was keerful to keep his eyes 'bout him."

"Yes, I should think that could be done without any trouble, particularly after dark."

"Oh, I kin slide in there at all times by being keerful!" the veteran declared. "I curl up in the corner of the woodshed once in a while for a nap, so the corral man has got used to seeing me in the neighborhood and he don't think nothing of it. Thar's a door in the back of the shop which leads into the woodshed; it has been nailed up, but I didn't have any trouble in gitting it open, and I fixed it so that nobody would suspect it had been touched. The place is all upside down inside, but I fixed up a roosting-place in one corner, next to the hotel wall, and it is jest fine I tell you."

"Yes, I should imagine that you would be quite comfortable."

"And now comes the p'int!" Joe Bowers declared, impressively. "I hain't been inflicting this hyer long yarn on you jest for the pleasure of hearing myself talk, you know. I am a gay old rooster, you bet, and thar is a heap of method in my madnes."

"Yes, any one with half an eye can see that you were not born yesterday," the sport observed.

"Pardner, you do me proud!" the veteran exclaimed, with an elaborate bow.

"The thing what I am going to tell is one of them strange affairs which go for to make a feller think that it is better to be born lucky than rich!" Joe Bowers declared, with the air of a philosopher.

"Well, to my notion, there isn't any doubt about that!" Keene exclaimed. "If I could have a chance, I would say, 'Give me the luck and let the other fellow take the riches!'"

"Me noble dook, you have got more common sense to the 'suar' inch than any man I have met in a dog's age!" Joe Bowers declared.

"Well, to come right down to my mutton, on the hotel side, the old shanty hain't got any wall, so thar is only one thickness of boards between the shop and the hotel bar-room, and in one of them boards is a knot-hole, 'bout big enuff for a man to put his thumb through, and a feller in the shanty, by putting his eye or ear to the hole, kin see or hear what goes on in the saloon."

"This is rather singular," the sport observed, thoughtfully. "Very odd indeed!"

"Pard, things are coming your way jest as if you was a-mounted on the box of Fortune's carriage and was a-driving the car of Fate all alone by yourself!" the veteran declared, solemnly, and then he proceeded to relate all the particulars of the conversation between Big John Valentine and Gilbert Featherstone, the Cowboy Dude, not a single word of which had escaped his attentive ears.

Keene listened with the greatest possible interest, and when the veteran bumper had finished the recital, remarked:

"Your happening to overhear this conversation was a rare piece of luck and no mistake!"

"Sport, you are safe in betting on what I say, every time, and that is the kind of a hair-pin I am!" Joe Bowers exclaimed with a great deal of dignity.

"I never had a very good opinion of Big John Valentine, but I did not think he was as great a rascal as this proves him to be."

"Oh, the leetle thousand dollars collared him for all he was worth!"

"And for that sum he is willing to sell his daughter—his own flesh and blood!" Keene exclaimed in a voice full of contempt. "Hanged if he isn't worse than a negro-driver!"

"That ornery cuss would sell his soul, I reckon, for a thousand good chocks, if he could find anybody fool enuff to make the offer!" the veteran declared.

"I know this Parson John well—and he knows me—to the tune of a good fifteen hundred dollars, I reckon!" the sport declared. "For it has cost that delightful specimen of a cowboy fully that sum to enjoy the pleasure of my society since I have been in this camp."

"Well, sports like you come high, but people must have 'em!" Joe Bowers remarked.

"He is one of the cowboys who is always flush, and as he labors under the impression that he knows how to play poker, and is not afraid to back his opinions with his money whenever he gets behind a hand of cards, I have succeeded in skinning him of five or six hundred dollars every time we have met."

"Oh, if I could only run up ag'in' such a soft snap!" the veteran exclaimed in longing accents.

"Yes, it is a soft snap, for the man is no player, although he thinks he is a terror," the sport remarked. "The last time I beat him he was pretty sore over it, and I fancy we would have had some trouble, for he had just about liquor enough on board to make him ugly, but some of his friends got him away."

"He is a pretty bad sort of a galoot, I reckon."

"Yes, an unmitigated scoundrel, even if he is a dominie."

"Do you believe that yarn?" Joe Bowers asked with a shrewd expression upon his weather-beaten face. "Don't you think it is probable that this hyer Cowboy Dude jest made up the tale so as to persuade Valentine that he was going to marry his daughter all right?"

"No, I reckon the story is true enough. The fellow is a man of education, and has been well brought up; there is no doubt about that, and I should not be at all surprised if he has been a minister," the sport answered.

"I hain't run across him since I struck the camp."

"No, he has not been to town for eight or ten days now, but it is about time that he put in an appearance. The last time I played with him he said that he would be after his revenge in a week or two."

"That means that he is going to give you a chance to skin him some more!" Joe Bowers exclaimed with a grin.

"Yes, that is about the English of it. Of course, I said that I would be glad to accommodate him at any time."

"Oh, you bet!" the veteran exclaimed.

"One of the cowboys on the One-Square Ranch has taken a great fancy to me. I helped him out of a scrape one night when he got in a squabble with some of the miners, and as he was all alone, he would probably have suffered if I had not come to his assistance. He is a good fellow and very anxious to be of service to me."

"He came to the camp the other day on purpose to warn me that I might expect to have trouble with Parson John if I was lucky enough to win any more money from him, for John was very sore over his numerous defeats, and had said at the ranch that if he failed to beat me at cards the next time he had a bout with me, he would try how skillful I was with fists or weapons."

"The bold parson is a regular fire-eater, eh?"

"Well, if he wasn't just talking for fun, his words would seem to indicate that he thought he was a better man than I am in the fisticuff line."

"Excuse my curiosity, me noble dook, but how do you pan out in that biz?" Joe Bowers asked, surveying the athletic figure of the other with the eye of an expert.

"A man is not always the best judge of what he can do, but parties who have tried me on have expressed themselves as being perfectly satisfied that I was able to take care of myself with either fists or pistols," the sport replied.

"You weigh 'bout a hundred and seventy, I reckon?" the veteran observed, in a calculating way.

"Nearer a hundred and eighty," Keene replied. "I am a little deceptive in my appearance and strip much bigger than I look."

"I do not doubt it; I have seen men jest like you afore, and you are in good condition, too, no useless fat, all bone, muscle and good solid flesh! I reckon now that if you went in strict training for a fight, or a foot-race, you needn't git rid of more than ten pounds."

"No, I do not believe that I would lose more than that."

"And a man who scales a hundred and seventy is big enough to fight for the championship of the world!" Joe Bowers declared, with the bearing of an oracle.

"Well, as a rule, I do not think that it is wise for a man in my line of business to get into any personal difficulties," the sport remarked, slowly.

"That is a fact," the other assented.

"And so I have always made it a rule to keep out of all quarrels if it was possible to do so without showing the white feather, and really running away."

"Oh, that would not do, of course, for if a man once did that every galoot in the town would try to impose on him!" Joe Bowers declared.

"I have been thinking a good deal over this Parson John business ever since I got the warning that he had it in his mind to make trouble for me, and I will admit that I have been decidedly puzzled to know what to do, but since I have heard your story I have been able to make up my mind," and an air of determination appeared on the face of the sport as he spoke.

Joe Bowers indulged in a chuckle.

"Me noble dook, I reckon that you are going to show Parson John that you are jest as handy with your fists, as you are with a deck of keards!"

"Yes, that is going to be my little game!" the sport replied with grim determination. "If the man seeks a quarrel with me he will find that I

am ready to accommodate him, and so quickly, too, that it will be apt to make his head swim!"

"That is just the kind of talk that I like to hear, and when the picnic takes place may I be thar to see it! I am willing to go me ducats on a reserved seat, way up in the bald-heads' row!"

"And if Parson John has the grit to stand up and face the music, after I get through with him it is possible that he will not be in a condition to perform a marriage ceremony for some time."

"And that will hinder Featherstone's little scheme."

"That is my idea."

"Well, I must be off now," and Joe Bowers rose. "I will keep my eyes open and if I hear anything new I will post you; so long!"

And away the veteran went.

CHAPTER XXI.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

THE sport watched Bowers as he descended the hill until he was hid from view by the houses in the valley, then the thoughts which were occupying his mind translated themselves into words.

"I never took a great deal of stock in religion," he remarked. "That is, I never went to church much, or made any study of the thing, and at no time in my life, from my boyhood upward, have I ever associated with religious people, but I must admit that there seems to be a heap of truth in some of the old scriptural sayings; take that one, for instance, about casting your bread upon the waters."

"Now see how that has come out in this case. This man, Old Benzine, was a stranger to me; I was not under the slightest obligation to extend a helping hand to him, unless I acted on the idea that all men were brothers, and that brothers were in duty bound to help one another."

"Well, I did go on that notion. I advanced him money, although I knew the chances were big that I would never see the color of my coin again."

"Now, mark the result! Thanks to that little transaction I have bound the man to me as with hooks of steel! Had I not put him under obligations to me I should not have known anything about this plot which the Cowboy Dude has concocted."

"Most surely the bread which I cast upon the waters has returned to me a hundred-fold, and it is the same way with the cowboy whom I befriended. If I had not taken the trouble to interfere in his behalf, I should not be posted in regard to Parson John's determination to make trouble for me if I am lucky enough to win his money the next time we play poker, and the odds are about a hundred to one that I will beat him."

"The timely warning puts me on my guard so I know exactly what is before me, and I will be on the watch for Parson John, so that it will not be possible for him to take me by surprise, and if his voice is for war, before we get through with the affair I think I will be able to show him that he is not such a holy terror as he imagines himself to be."

Then the sport fell into a fit of abstraction and for fully ten minutes was silent, his brows contracted and his eyes fixed on the ground.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed at last. "I do not really know what to do about this girl matter. She ought to know of this plot, for it is not right to allow her to remain in ignorance. But then it is a delicate task to reveal to a daughter that her father is a rascal of the first water, and ready to sell her to the highest bidder. The revelation ought to be made though."

"And now, another question arises. Will the girl have confidence enough in me to believe the tale? Will she not have faith in her father?"

"This is a very difficult matter to decide, but to my mind one thing is certain, and that is I ought to let the girl know what is going on."

"If she does not choose to believe me, it will be unfortunate, but it is my duty to speak and speak I will!"

And just as the sport pronounced these words he caught sight of Blanche Valentine.

She was mounted on her pony and was riding along the trail which led to the eastward, the way to the outer world from Ricaree Valley.

Keene watched the girl as she came on, the pony loping along at a pace but little better than a walk.

As Blanche came to the spot where the little foot-path, which led to the lonely cabin of the sport, branched off from the main trail, she cast a glance up at the hillside, and as she perceived the sport, smiled and bowed.

Keene rose to his feet and returned the salutation.

The girl continued on down the trail.

The sport came to a sudden determination.

"By taking a short cut through the foot-hills, I can intercept her!" he exclaimed. "And I will do it too! Since I have determined to speak, the more quickly I do it, the better, and then the affair will be off my mind!"

Keene hurried into his cabin, took his shotgun and a supply of cartridges, then, after padlocking his cabin door, hastened down the foot-

path until he came to where a narrow trail—a regular blind Indian path, branched off to the eastward through the foot-hills.

This narrow trail the sport took and followed it like one accustomed to the way.

He hurried on at a good pace. The trail, though winding amid the trees, around the rocks, and over the broken ground in a serpentine fashion, yet was straightness itself when compared to the main road, and owing to this circumstance Keene was able to intercept the fair rider at a point about a mile from the valley.

As the two trails ran parallel for a few hundred yards before they came together, the coming of the sport, when he reached the main road was not a surprise to the girl.

She reined in her steed and, extending her hand, greeted him in the most cordial manner.

"You will have to excuse my running after you this way!" the sport exclaimed as he clasped the soft, white palm of the girl in his own muscular brown hand. "But I had something to say to you, and I thought better to seek an interview here amid the rocks, than in the town where the circumstance might give rise to a deal of gossip."

"Yes, I think you are wise," the girl replied. "It is always better not to give people an opportunity to talk. Even in a little town like this there are plenty of gossips."

"Oh, yes, plenty of people who have so little business of their own to trouble them that they can afford lots of time to devote to their neighbors."

"But had we not better leave this public trail, where we might be apt to be seen, and go up into the one by which you came?" the girl said, a charming blush mantling her cheeks at her boldness in the speaking.

"Yes, it would be prudent, for if any of the townsmen were to come upon us conversing here they would be certain to believe, and report, that we had met by appointment."

"That thought was in my mind and that was why I spoke."

And then Blanche dismounted from her steed, Keene took the animal by the reins and led the way up into the foot-hills, the girl following. In a few minutes they reached a little open glade, secluded from the observation of any one passing along the main trail.

The sport tethered the horse; the girl seated herself upon a boulder, while Keene leaned against the trunk of a stubby oak and looked down, thoughtfully, in the bright face of the blooming girl.

"There, this will do nicely for our interview," she said. "We can talk here as long as we like, and no one will be the wiser for it."

"Yes, that is truth."

"And now, before you begin your communication, I am going to take you to task," Blanche said, archly. "It is over a week since our acquaintanceship began, and yet you have not taken the trouble to seek another interview, which, it seems to me, is plain proof that you do not value my friendship very highly, or else you would not so persistently keep away from me."

"Why, I have seen you three times at the hotel," the sport replied, in a decidedly awkward and embarrassed way, which was odd, for Keen Billy was not one of the bashful kind.

"Three times, eh?" exclaimed Blanche, with a merry little laugh. "Well, you have been interested enough to keep account of the number of times, I see, which is more than I expected."

"Oh, come now; don't you think that you are a little severe on me?" Keene exclaimed.

"Well, I don't know; am I?" the girl inquired in a quizzical way.

"Yes, I think so, and really you are making me have an extremely good opinion of myself. I had no idea that you would care to cultivate the acquaintance of such a man as I am."

"Ah, now you are trying to depreciate your value. Is that done for the purpose of getting me to say that I think you are a desirable acquaintance?" the girl exclaimed, archly.

"Oh, no, nothing was further from my thoughts, I assure you!" the sport protested.

"I was only jesting!" Blanche remarked. "I presume I understand what you mean. You explained the matter to me on our first meeting."

Your way of life, you think, debars you from seeking the society of such a girl as I am; but as I told you then I do not agree with you, and I am just as willing to acknowledge you as my friend as any gentleman that I know of in the camp. I tried to make you understand that when we conversed together before, but I suppose I set about it in a stupid way, or else you would have comprehended."

"Oh, no, I understood you well enough, but you must consider the circumstances," the sport exclaimed. "You spoke on the spur of the moment, without taking time for consideration, and under very peculiar circumstances too; you considered that I had done you a favor and it was only natural that you should be grateful."

"Yes, I should think so!" the girl exclaimed.

"But when you came to reflect upon the matter, there was a possibility that you might think you had been a little hasty."

"Ah, now you are not dealing fairly with me, and I really feel hurt," Blanche declared, evidently annoyed by the supposition. "You must

think that I set no value at all upon my life, not to be grateful to the man who preserved it.

"Well, now I have had ample time to think the matter over, and I am not speaking on the spur of the moment, without consideration, and I assure you that there is no person in all this wide world, whose friendship I prize more dearly than I do yours!"

It was with an earnest voice and heightened color that Blanche made the declaration and as the sport looked down upon the attractive face of the speaker the thought came to him that never before had he seen as beautiful a woman.

"Well, now, Blanche, I will say to you, right honestly, that I am heartily glad of it!" he declared in deep and earnest tones. "I did not want to take advantage of the accident which gave me the pleasure of making your acquaintance, and so I kept away from you, although I admit I was not able to resist the temptation of coming to the hotel for a meal every now and then, so as to be able to get a look at you."

This avowal, and the manner in which it was made, caused the color to crimson the conscious face of the girl, and in charming confusion she cast her gaze upon the ground.

"I have not offended you, Blanche, I hope by this confession?" he exclaimed.

"Offended me! Oh, no!" she replied, raising her eyes again to his face, and Keene noticed the peculiar, deep, soft look which now shone in the brilliant orbs. "Is it not pleasant for a woman to learn that she has attracted the man for whose good opinion she cares?"

There was a look in the girl's face which told Keene that the time for speaking had come.

He seated himself on the rock by Blanche's side, passed his arm around her waist, and took her hand in his.

The girl did not attempt to draw away, but nestled like a bird against his broad chest, resting her head upon his shoulder.

"Blanche, you are the first girl that I have ever seen whom I fancied I would like to marry, and I fell in love with you when you first came to the town; with me it was a case of love at first sight, but I did not presume to seek to make your acquaintance, for I thought my way of living raised a barrier between us that was not surmountable, and so I contented myself by admiring you afar, as a man might worship a star!"

"I do not care if you get a living by playing cards!" Blanche declared, impetuously. "I am satisfied that you are a gentleman, an honest man, and I am sure I can trust my future in your hands without danger of your betraying the faith I place in you."

"Yes, I believe you can, and if I did not think so I would not seek to win your affections," Keene declared.

"I am sure of that," the girl replied, her tone full of confidence.

"And will you be my wife, then, Blanche? Are you willing to trust all your future life in my hands?"

"Yes," the girl replied, in low but resolute tones.

Then the compact was sealed with a kiss.

"Well, Blanche, as I deal with you, may fate deal with me!" Keene exclaimed.

"Oh, I have no fear for the future!" Blanche declared. "Without a single misgiving, I trust myself in your hands."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE REVELATION.

FOR a few moments the lovers sat and looked in each other's eyes, happy beyond expression.

Keene was the first to break the silence.

"Blanche, when I set out to overtake you I little expected that before we parted we should plight our vows to become man and wife."

"And I had no expectation of such a thing I assure you, although ever since that day in the gulch your image has been ever before me," the girl replied.

"Well, since we feel as we do about the matter it is just as well that we came to an understanding first as last," the sport remarked.

"And now in regard to this business that I follow. It is all right for a man to be a gambler in a town like this; nobody thinks any the worse of a man because he depends upon card-playing for a living, but this is a wild, rude and lawless camp, and after you are my wife I should not be satisfied to keep you here."

"And I confess I have no desire to remain here!" the girl declared. "I have never liked the place from the time when I first set foot in it!"

"Well, I do not blame you. A camp like this is not an attractive place even for a man of my stamp, and I do not wonder that an educated, intelligent, ladylike girl, as you are, should not be satisfied with it."

"Oh, I think that it is a horrid place, and I should fairly loathe the thought of taking up my permanent residence here."

"There is not the least danger of our doing anything of the kind, so make your mind easy on that score!" the sport declared. "And this is what I was going to speak about. I am not going to marry you, Blanche, and make a gambler's wife out of you. From the hour that our hands are joined in wedlock I never more will

touch a card—never risk a dollar on any game of chance!"

"I shall be glad of that, although I am content to join my fate to yours, even though you do get your living in such a way," the girl observed.

"I will take you out of this region entirely!" the sport declared. "We will go many a hundred miles from here, and in a new country, where no one knows aught of me, we will commence another life!"

"Oh, that will be delightful!" Blanche exclaimed, a bright, happy light shining in her brilliant eyes.

"Yes, I am in a condition to make the move too," Keene asserted. "It is the popular impression that all gamblers are sad spendthrifts, who get rid of their money, when luck runs their way, as fast as possible; easy got, easy gone; you know, but I can assure you that in my own case the supposition is not true, for I am a careful, prudent man and I look after my dollars just as closely as the average, successful merchant, so I am well-fixed, as the saying is, and when we get down to New Mexico, which is where I think of settling, I will be able to take a ranch and start in good shape."

"The outlook is bright indeed, and you can depend upon my doing all I can to help you!" Blanche exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I have no doubt in regard to that!" Keene declared. "You will be a true helpmate."

"But I am forgetting the purpose for which I sought this interview with you," he added. "I did not anticipate that we would come to an agreement to link our lives together, and the unexpected occurrence has thrown me off the track a little."

"You do not regret it, I hope?" Blanche exclaimed with the natural coquetry of woman.

"Oh, no!" Keene declared, quickly. "I bless the fortunate chance which enabled us to come to an understanding. But to return to what I was going to say. I have an unpleasant revelation to make—it concerns your father."

The face of the girl clouded over.

"My father?" she said, slowly.

"Yes, I would not say anything about the matter if it was not something that you ought to know," Keene remarked. "When the matter first came to my knowledge I hesitated about speaking to you on the subject, for I had a fear that you might not be willing to believe me, but after what has passed between us to-day, I am satisfied that if I speak you will credit my story."

"Indeed I will, for I am sure you will not tell me an untruth for the world!"

"You may rest assured that I would not do so knowingly!" the sport replied. "And in this case, although I did not overhear the conversation which I am about to relate to you, yet I feel certain that my informant is a man who can be trusted."

And then Keene related to Blanche the particulars of the conversation in reference to herself which had occurred between Big John Valentine and the Cowboy Dude.

The girl listened attentively and did not interrupt the recital by making any comments, but when it was finished she shook her head in a sad way.

"The story pains you?" Keene remarked, gently.

"Yes, but I am not surprised by it, for I have been expecting something of the sort," Blanche replied.

"It is an awful thing for a girl to be obliged to say that she has no faith in her own father, but in my case it is the truth; I regret that it is so, but I will not attempt to deny the truth. From my early childhood—from the time when I became old enough to understand what was going on around me—I comprehended that my father was a weak, irresolute man with so little perception of what was right or wrong that he could be persuaded by bad men, or forced from needy circumstances to do that which he should have known was not right."

"Yes, from what I know of him I should imagine that he was just such a man."

"My mother was weak and foolish as far as he was concerned, I could see that even as a child," the girl declared. "She did not seem to be capable of seeing that he was doing wrong, no matter how he acted, and she clung to him with the greatest faith until he died."

"That is the life story of many a wife."

"My father took care of me—not through any natural affection, for he never seemed to possess any, either for me, his child, or my mother, who sacrificed all that she held dear in the world for his sake—but because I was not only able to earn my own living from the time I was twelve years old, but also contribute money to his support."

"Well, Blanche, I will admit that I have had a poor opinion of your father ever since I have known him," Keene observed. "I think I am a pretty good judge of human nature. I have devoted a good deal of time to study in that line, and your father impressed me as being a man who would be willing to do almost anything for money, provided that it did not bring his precious person in peril, for he is one of the

kind who believes in taking good care of himself."

"Your estimate of his character is correct, and I am perfectly satisfied that the person who related this conversation to you was not guilty of any exaggeration."

"Oh, I have faith that he is perfectly trustworthy!" Keene asserted. "It was just by an accident that he happened to overhear the discussion, and as he is a strong friend of mine he came straight to me with the news."

"It is dreadful to think that my father, who ought to be my protector, should lend himself to such a miserable plot!" the girl declared.

"I knew that the fortunate accident which enabled me to be of service to you was as gall and wormwood to this Featherstone," and then Keene related the particulars of the interview he had had with the Cowboy Dude and his henchman, Black Tom Murphy, after Blanche had departed from the gulch, on the day of the mountain lion incident.

"And these men would probably have killed you if you had not been ready for them!" Blanche exclaimed.

"Well, I think they might have tried something of the kind; they meant mischief! There is no mistake about that!"

"You must be on your guard!" the girl cried; all her womanly fears aroused for the man she loved.

"Oh, I am!" Keene replied. "Don't you worry about that. A man who leads the life of a sport has got to keep his eyes open or he will be apt to get into trouble. There is no profession in the world where a man learns quicker to keep his wits about him."

"You will be careful then not to let these villains take you at a disadvantage?"

"Yes, you can depend upon that! Don't you worry about the matter. The men who succeed in catching me unprepared for trouble will have to get up extremely early in the morning!" the sport asserted in the most confident way.

"Oh, you must be careful for my sake!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, I will, but, I say, you are forgetting your own danger in thinking of mine," he observed.

"True! I forgot for the moment that there was a plot against me," she replied with a sad smile.

"But now that you know the nature of the scheme you will be on your guard!"

"Oh, yes, trust me for that!" Blanche cried, confidently. "And as long as I am on my guard I do not believe that this miserable rancher will be able to get me in his power."

"No, I do not see how he can," Keene replied, thoughtfully.

"Of course, if I did not know there was a plot it would have been an easy matter to entrap me."

"Yes, particularly when your own father would lead you into the snare."

"Oh, it would not have been difficult, for I would not have had any suspicion, and I would surely have been entrapped."

"It is very probable."

"Yet cunning as these men are they did not calculate upon one thing," the girl observed, with an air of firm determination.

"And what is that?"

"That even if they succeeded in getting me into their snare, they might not be able to force me to marry this Gilbert Featherstone!" Blanche declared.

"They would not wait until you consented," Keene remarked. "They would force you into the union. This Parson John would undoubtedly perform the ceremony although you were shrieking against it at the top of your lungs!"

"But I have a friend here who would fight for me!" the girl exclaimed, and as she spoke she drew a small revolver from her bosom. "Ever since the day when my life was threatened by the mountain cat I have carried this weapon, concealed, and unknown to any one; if I was entrapped I should not hesitate to use it upon the man who was responsible for the outrage!"

"My brave girl!" Keene exclaimed, in admiration, and he folded her to his heart in a warm embrace.

A moment she clung lovingly to him, and then, blushing scarlet, withdrew herself from his embrace.

"Now, I must return to the camp," she said.

"And when shall we meet again?" he asked, eagerly.

"To-morrow, at this same hour and in this place," she replied. "This is as good a meeting-place as we can find, I think," she continued.

"Yes, I think you are right about that. To-morrow, then, at this same hour?"

The girl nodded assent, and then they left the glade.

When they reached a point where it was possible for the girl to ride, the sport assisted her into the saddle.

Then again the lovers clasped their arms around each other, and Keene pressed a farewell kiss upon the rich, red lips.

Blanche rode down the trail to the main road, while the sport struck through the foot-hills, returning by the same path that he had come.

"Well, the die is cast and I have won the prize!" Keene exclaimed, as he strode along. "I have been successful in this first venture, and now we will see how I get along with Parson John and the Cowboy Dude, for it is almost certain that I will have trouble with both man and master!"

But that the sport had little apprehension of the result, was plain from his cheerful manner, for he proceeded onward like a man without care.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PARSON JOHN'S RESOLVE.

THE Cowboy Dude was not a man to talk much of his affairs to any one, and so he did not speak to his especial confidant, Black Tom Murphy, of the agreement he had made with the landlord.

Murphy understood, though, that Featherstone was after the girl, and that he looked upon Keen Billy as likely to prove a dangerous rival.

It was the Cowboy Dude's intention to reveal to Black Tom Murphy the scheme which he and Big John Valentine had concocted, for he counted on his aid in carrying it out, but as he had made up his mind not to be in a hurry about the matter, he delayed the revelation.

It was Featherstone's idea that it would be best to wait for a week or two before making any move.

His calculation was that if he did not worry the girl by paying her any attentions, and the father did not say anything more about the matter, Blanche would naturally come to the conclusion that he was content to take "no" for an answer, and if the girl was thus thrown off her guard, it would be a far easier matter to entrap her than if she apprehended that he was still in pursuit.

Black Tom Murphy was, like a faithful henchman, anxious to do all in his power to aid his employer, and so when it came to his knowledge that Parson John had been talking pretty loudly as to what he intended to do if Keen Billy succeeded in flaxing him at poker again, he made a point of seeing the cowboy in regard to the matter.

Parson John was a muscular, well-built fellow about five feet ten inches high and weighing in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds.

Five years before he had been a splendid specimen of physical manhood, an almost perfect model for a sculptor, but Nature is an imperious mistress and will not be trifled with, and the life of wild and reckless dissipation that the cowboy had led had materially sapped the power which had once made him a very king among men.

His muscles were not what they were, his flesh was soft and flabby, to use the sporting phrase he was "carrying too much fat," and when it came to great muscular exertions this useless weight would surely affect his wind and when a man has "bellows to mend," whether he is engaged in a fight, a foot-race, or any sport of the kind, it is "all day" with him.

Murphy found Parson John engaged in saddling a horse in company with a boon companion of his, a wiry, undersized Mexican-American known as Tony Gorges.

The Mexican was an ugly, disagreeable fellow who had the reputation of being prone to use his knife upon the slightest provocation.

Tony was already in the saddle and Parson John was just buckling his "cinch" as Black Tom Murphy came up.

This was about six o'clock in the afternoon of the day which followed the one on which occurred the events described in our last chapter.

"Hello, boys! whar's ye bound?" Black Tom Murphy inquired.

"We are going to Ricaree City," Parson John replied. "We are so flush with money that we don't know what to do with it, and so we thought we would go on a little jamboree down to the camp."

"Look out that you don't get too much licker aboard and give the snap away!" Murphy continued.

Both of the men laughed the idea to scorn. "Sometimes when the bug-juice gets into a man's head it is apt to make him talkative, you know," Black Tom Murphy remarked. "And a word carelessly spoken might put somebody on the scent."

"Don't you worry about that!" Parson John exclaimed. "Both Tony and myself are old soakers and we never get so full as not to know what we are about, eh, Tony?"

"Oh, no, we always keep a still tongue between our teeth, no matter how much drink we have taken!" the Mexican declared.

"Oh, I know that you are not loose-mouthed galoots, but you want to keep a watch on yourselves if you are going in for a spree. We have been running this thing so finely that it would be a shame to burst it up by any foolishness!" Black Tom Murphy declared.

"Possess your souls with the positive assurance, friend Murphy, that we are safe to tie to, every time!" Parson John replied. "I reckon that you never saw either Tony or myself when

we did not know what we were about, no matter how much liquor we had drank."

"Yes, you are right thar," the other admitted. "But there has got to be a first time, you know."

"Oh, we have got away with too much benzine to have a first time, I reckon," Parson John declared.

"When you find me so drunk that I blab secrets of which I ought not to speak, put a rope around my neck and hang me!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"Going down to see if you can get rid of some of your money, eh?" Murphy remarked.

"Yes, we have so much that we are afraid it will burn a hole in our pockets," Parson John announced, gravely.

"Say! if you go to showing how well you are heeled with ducats, some of these long-headed galoots in the camp will be apt to wonder how on earth you kin continue to git hold of so much money, for cowboys don't generally go around with four or five hundred dollars in their pockets, unless they let their wages stay back and draw them all in a lump."

"Oh, we do that, of course!" Parson John exclaimed with a knowing wink. "And then we gamble up the ranch here among ourselves and Tony and I always wins, eh, Tony?"

"Oh, yes, we always win!" and the Mexican displayed his white teeth in a laugh.

"But if what I hear of your doing in Ricaree City are true you don't have as good luck down there," Black Tom Murphy remarked significantly.

"He had now come to the point which he had in his mind when he came up and engaged in the conversation."

It was his purpose to spur Parson John on—to inflame his mind against Keene so that he might be led to regard him as an enemy, but as he knew the cowboy to be a shrewd fellow and was anxious not to allow Parson John to penetrate his purpose he got at the matter in this roundabout way.

The face of the cowboy clouded over and an angry light came into his eyes.

"Well, my luck has not been as good as it might be," he observed, slowly.

"No, I should say not, if one-half only of what I have heard is true," Black Tom Murphy remarked. "Why, some of the miners in the camp were telling me when I was down there a day or two ago that this sport, Keene, or Keen Billy, as they call him, has cleaned you out to your bottom dollar as regularly as clockwork every time you came to town."

"The fellows had better mind their own business!" Parson John exclaimed, angrily. "If I find that any of them are wagging their tongues too freely about me I will be apt to call them to an account."

"Oh, it is not the truth then!" Murphy exclaimed, and with an air of relief. "Well, I am glad to hear it, for I will admit that it riled me when I heard these camp galoots boasting what a soft snap Keen Billy had, and how he blowed about the town that it was just play for him to skin you of your wealth."

"This sport had better be careful what he says or he may find that his tongue will get him in trouble!" Parson John declared with a lowering look.

"It made me mad to hear sich yarns!" Black Tom Murphy exclaimed. "For a man like you ought to be a match for any common, low-down sport of the Keen Billy stamp!"

"Well, I don't know about that," the other replied, slowly. "As a sport he is a head and shoulders above any other man in the town; in fact in all my travels I have never run across a man who could play cards much better than he can, and then, too, the fellow seems to have the devil's own luck."

"He is ahead of you in the game?" Murphy exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I have contributed quite largely to the support of this sport," Parson John remarked with a grimace. "And most unwillingly too, I can assure you," he added.

"How comes it that he manages to get the best of you? Is he so far superior a player that you can't hold your own with him?" Murphy asked.

"Well, I don't know," Parson John replied, slowly and reflectively. "I reckon you will have to ask me an easier question than that. It is a puzzle that I have been trying to solve ever since I first ran across the man, and I am obliged to confess that I don't think I know any more about it than I did in the beginning. Apparently he is not a better player than I am, and when I look back it doesn't seem as if he has been much more favored by luck than I, but there is no denying that he is away ahead of me."

"It seems to me that this is rather odd," the foreman remarked. "Do you think he plays a good, square game?"

"He certainly seems to."

"Under the circumstances, if I were you, I should be under the impression that he was skinning me by some trick!" Black Tom Murphy declared.

"The thought has occurred to me," Parson John remarked, a dark look on his bronzed face. "I have kept a close watch on him the last two

or three times we played, but did not succeed in discovering anything suspicious."

"You would be apt to make it warm for him if you did, eh?" Murphy suggested.

"You bet I would!" Parson John exclaimed fiercely. "I would hammer the fellow within an inch of his life!" And as he spoke he doubled up his fist and shook it menacingly in the air.

"That is the way to talk!" Black Tom Murphy declared, approvingly. "But there is one little thing in a game of this kind which I reckon you have not taken into consideration," he added.

"What is that?" Parson John questioned.

"If you are able!" Murphy exclaimed, with a laugh. "That is a pint that you must allers look arter. You will hammer the sport if you are able; if you ain't he will hammer you." And then the speaker laughed loudly, as though he considered that he had said a good thing.

The face of Parson John grew dark with rage, and again he doubled up his fist and shook it in the air.

"If I am not good for him then I am not good for anybody!" he declared.

"I have heard that Keen Billy is a tough man in a row," Murphy remarked, with a sober shake of the head.

It was his game to urge the cowboy on so as to send him into the camp all ready for a fight with the sport.

"Well, men who have tried it on have generally been of the opinion that I am a tough man!" the cowboy declared. "There was a time, when I was a young fellow at college, when I was considered to be a match for any man of my weight in the town, and I reckon I have not entirely forgotten my old-time training, although I suppose I am considerable rusty, as I have not had any practice in that line for a good many years; but for all that I guess I am good for this sport," and Parson John's contemptuous way of speaking showed that he did not rate Keen Billy to rank high as a warrior.

"You ought to be able to get away with him!" the fireman declared. "You are a bigger man than he is in every way!"

"The parson will break him in two!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"Oh you think the fight is all over but the shouting, eh?" Black Tom Murphy observed, amused at the confidence of Tony.

"He will not stand any chance!" the cowboy replied. "Parson John will hammer him to a standstill inside of five minutes."

"Mebbe so, but he may turn out to be a better man than you think," Murphy warned. "You don't want to make the mistake, John, of underrating the fellow. I have known a good many good men slip up on good things jest because they reckoned the game was going to be so easy that they need not get a good ready on."

"Oh, you can rest assured that I shall not make any mistake of that kind!" Parson John declared. "But I will admit that I do not think this sport amounts to much as a warrior."

"Well, I don't know about that," Murphy remarked. "As a rule, you know, all these sports are pretty handy in that line; they have to be, or else they would not be able to get along."

"I have never heard of this Keen Billy having any trouble with any one since he has been in the camp," Parson John said.

"No, I never heard of anything of the kind happening either, and I don't believe that he ever has had any trouble, but then he has not been long in the camp and probably nothing has occurred to raise a row," Murphy observed.

"Well, there will be a row if he succeeds in skinning me out of my wealth this time!" Parson John declared.

"You are going to the camp with that idea, eh?" the foreman exclaimed with a laugh.

"Yes, you can bet I am!" the other replied.

"I made up my mind to it some time ago—after I got back to the ranch from our last game when he cleaned me out of over four hundred dollars in a couple of hours."

"Quick work!" Black Tom Murphy exclaimed.

"Yes, and it was done in such a way that I couldn't find any fault with it either, but I shall not let him work the game that way again. If he cleans me out to-night, he has got to come up to the scratch and fight me. I will insult him so that he will have to take it up or else show himself to be nothing but a craven coward!" Parson John declared.

"Oh, I reckon he will meet you half-way!" Murphy observed. "I don't think you will have any difficulty in getting a fight out of him."

"Well, I hope not, for if I lose my money I want satisfaction, and if I can whale him it will relieve my mind a little."

"Well, I wish you luck!" Murphy exclaimed. The cowboys nodded and rode off, going down the valley in the direction of the mining-camp.

Murphy watched them for a few minutes, and then murmured:

"The parson ought to be good for the sport, for he is the biggest man of the two, and from what he said I reckon he knows how to handle himself."

At this moment Featherstone came out of the ranch, and perceiving that Murphy was gazing down the valley, looked to see what had attracted his attention.

"It is Parson John and Tony," the foreman explained. "They are off for the camp."

"Their money burns in their pockets, I suppose," the rancher remarked. "It is a strange fact that some men can never rest content when they get hold of a little money, until they have a chance to squander it."

"That is so," Murphy coincided. "They are off for a time, of course. They are going to drink and gamble, and I doubt if either one of them will leave the camp while a dollar remains."

"That is usually the way."

"And by the way, I put up a little job on Parson John, so as to get him to help you along a little," the foreman remarked.

"How is that?"

"Well, he has been gambling with this Keen Billy, and as he is no match for the sharp, he gets cleaned out regularly."

"Yes, I have heard of that."

"The parson is a little sore over the matter," Murphy explained. "He thinks he is just as good a player as the sport, and just as lucky, too, and it is a mystery to him why he does not win sometimes—"

"I have been told by men in the camp who have watched the games, that the parson is no player at all," the rancher interrupted.

"I should not be at all surprised if that is the truth. As a rule, the poorer player a man is the greater his conceit," Black Tom Murphy observed, shrewdly.

"Yes, I have known such to be the case."

"Well, I reckon no one could persuade Parson John that he is not away up at the top of the heap as a gambler, and the idea of being regularly skinned by the sport has made him mad and he has gone to the camp now with the notion of raising a row with Keen Billy if he loses his money."

"I reckon the row will take place then," Featherstone remarked. "For from what they say of the two men the odds are about ten to one that the sport will have all the money when the game ends."

"If it works that way then Keen Billy will have a fight on his hands, for Parson John has made up his mind to climb the sharp if he loses."

"Gone with that idea, eh?" the Cowboy Dude asked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and I did all I could to egg him on," Murphy declared. "For it was my idea that if he succeeded in hammering the sharp within an inch of his life as he declares he will do it might serve to keep the man from getting in your way for a while."

"Yes, I see; your idea is a good one, Murphy, but I am afraid that it will not work," the rancher remarked, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Why not?"

"Well, to my thinking the sharp is much more apt to hammer Parson John than he is to get the best of the sport."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, indeed, I do."

"The parson is a good man—and he is bigger every way than the sport."

"But he has been dissipating too much!" the rancher declared. "How many ducats would you bet on a man in the prize-ring if you knew he had not trained for the fight and had been drinking all the liquor he could get hold of?"

"Well, I reckon I would not put much wealth on him."

"That is just the case with Parson John. For five or ten years he has been burning the candle at both ends, and it is just as certain as fate that a man has got to pay for that sort of thing! When the time comes for him to tax his physical powers to their utmost he will find that he is not the man he once was, his stamina is gone—no staying powers, and almost before he knows it he discovers that he is practically helpless."

"Do you think the parson is as badly off as all this?" Murphy remarked in wonder.

"I do, and you mark my words, if there is a fight between him and Keen Billy, if he does not whip the sport in the first four or five minutes the other will make a holy show out of him!"

"Well, I did not reckon it would work that way, and I thought I was pulling the wires mighty nicely when I set him on to tackle the sport."

"Oh, it does not make any particular difference, excepting that if the sharp gets the best of John it will make a sort of a hero out of him, for the men in the camp have got the idea that the parson is a dangerous man, and if Keen Billy cleans him out it will make his stock go up."

"That is a fact!"

"I am sorry that the thing is working this way," the rancher observed, reflectively. "Still it is one of those affairs that you cannot do anything with. From the reports that I have heard I got the idea there would be trouble between the two, and I had it in my mind to speak to the parson about it, although I doubt if my speaking would have been productive of any good

results, for the parson is a bull-headed fellow about some things."

"Yes, I reckon it would not have made much difference. He had made up his mind to pick a quarrel with Keene if the sport won his money again and I doubt if he could have been talked out of the notion."

"Well, if the sport hammers him, as I think he will, John will have more sense next time."

"I will be hanged if I don't go down to the camp and see how it comes out!" Murphy declared, abruptly.

"I would if I were you, and if there is a fight, remember my prediction."

Ten minutes later Black Tom Murphy was in the saddle and riding toward Ricaree City.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE STRANGER.

AFTER his conversation with Black Tom Murphy, Featherstone had re-entered the ranch, and there fell to meditating upon the matter.

"I do not like this affair," he muttered. "I am fully satisfied that Parson John is no match for the sport. He was quick and able enough to stand both Murphy and myself off in the gulch after he rescued the girl from the cat, and it stands to reason that such a man is not going to let a drunkard of the Parson John stamp get away with him."

"And then suppose that he should hammer John so badly as to confine him to his bed for a couple of weeks or a month, my scheme would have to be postponed until John got about again."

"It is unlucky that it should happen just at this time!"

And then he mused in silence over the matter for a good ten minutes.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"I will go to the camp myself and see how the affair ends!" he cried.

He ordered his horse to be saddled, and when the steed was brought, mounted and set out.

His thoughts were not agreeable ones as he rode down through the valley.

"I wish Murphy had held his tongue about this thing!" he exclaimed at last, after brooding over the matter for some time.

"Murphy is a good man enough, but he hasn't got any head, and such men always blunder when they attempt to get in any fine work."

"Of course, he was not aware of the game I had in mind to play, and that game will be completely upset if the sport lays Parson John up in the event of a fight; in my opinion, too, it is dollars to cents that John will get an unmerciful thrashing if he banter the sport into a fight."

And after uttering this opinion the rancher rode on for a mile or so, brooding over the matter.

Then again he put his thoughts into words.

"There is another point to be considered, too!" he exclaimed. "But such thick-headed men as Murphy never take time to look at a matter of this kind in all its bearings."

"It is for my interest to keep on good terms with the miners. There is always more or less jealousy existing between the cowboys and the dwellers in camps like this."

"Now, if the townsmen get the idea into their heads that the cattlemen desire to run the town, it will be sure to breed trouble. For all that he is a man of education, Parson John is bull-headed and perversely blind sometimes."

"It will not be the sport's game to have any trouble. Men in his line always try to get along as easily as possible, so that the cowboy will have to provoke him into a difficulty—that is, force him into a fight without rhyme or reason, and will not the townsmen be apt to consider that this shows a disposition on the part of the cowboys to ride over the town?"

The rancher shook his head gravely, as he reflected upon the matter.

The way that affairs were going annoyed him greatly.

"I don't suppose that it will be of any use for me to attempt to try to get John away," he muttered after reflecting upon the matter for some time.

"If I interfere the chances are that it will only make matters worse."

"Strange how blind some men are!" he cried, abruptly.

Here is John deliberately getting into the quarrel, perfectly sure that he will have no difficulty in disposing of the sport, and Murphy doing his best to urge him on, thinking that he is doing me a service, and certain that the cowboy will not have a hard job if he attempts to whip Keen."

"A stale, dissipated man who has been filling himself with whisky for the last ten years, against a clear, cool-headed sport, who is probably in the pink of condition for a struggle of this kind."

"Bah! one would think that a man like Murphy would have more sense!"

Then, in order to relieve his mind the rancher stuck his spurs into his horse and went on at a brisk gallop.

In due time he arrived at Ricaree City.

He rode to the hotel corral and put up his horse, then entered the saloon.

The shades of night had fallen over the town by this time and the miners had commenced to gather in the bar-room for their nightly gossip.

Big John Valentine was behind the bar, and not busy, as it happened, when Featherstone entered.

The rancher approached him.

"Have you seen any of my men in the camp to-night?" Featherstone asked.

The landlord reflected for a moment before replying.

"No, I reckon I have not," he answered. "Leastways I don't remember to have caught sight of them."

"There were three or four came to town; Black Tom Murphy and Parson John were in the number and I wanted to see them."

"They have not been in here this evening," Valentine replied.

"They are probably around town somewhere," the rancher observed.

"Yes, I reckon so."

While this conversation was going on a man who was lounging by one of the windows at the back part of the saloon had been attentively observing Featherstone.

He was a stranger in the camp, having made his appearance there with the coming on of the night.

A powerfully built fellow dressed roughly, well-armed, with a heavy shock of hair and a bristle like stubble of a beard, his appearance was not prepossessing.

The moment that the rancher entered the saloon—the stranger had his eyes on the door and noted Featherstone as soon as he made his appearance—the new-comer turned to the man who stood nearest to him, who happened to be Keen Billy's particular friend, Dave Ginger, and said: "Who is yon man? It 'pears to me that I have seen him somewhere before."

The stranger spoke with a decided accent, what an Englishman would call a north-country burr, which seemed to indicate that he was a foreigner.

"Mebbe you have," Ginger remarked, slowly, taking a careful survey of the other as he spoke. "I reckon he is a man who has traveled 'round a good deal."

"And what is his name?"

"Featherstone."

"Featherstone, eh?" repeated the stranger, slowly, and there was a look on his face as though he was trying to remember whether he had ever known a man by that name or not.

"Yes, Gilbert Featherstone, and the boys have nicknamed him the Cowboy Dude."

"Cowboy Dude, hey?" exclaimed the other, as though he was astonished by the title.

"That is what they call him. He is a rancher, and owns the One-Square place up at the head of the valley, and because he dresses so mighty fine is the reason the boys put the nickname on him."

"Yes, I see," responded the stranger, slowly, and with his eyes fixed on Featherstone.

"I don't take much stock in the cowboys, anyway!" Dave Ginger declared. "I think they air a measly lot of whisky-drinking sons-of-guns, and it is my reckoning that this hyer town would be a heap sight better off if the cowboys kept out of it!"

"Mebbe so, mebbe so!" the man remarked. "I ain't posted, 'cos I am a stranger in these diggin's. Is this hyer Cowboy Dude a hard case?"

"Oh, I don't know much about him!" Dave Ginger exclaimed, with a snort of contempt. "I reckon, though, that he ain't any better than he ought to be."

"I thought mebbe that I knew him, but I reckon he ain't the man I took him to be," and then the stranger sauntered off, going toward the door.

Dave Ginger was not favorably impressed with the new-comer, and when he moved away the miner kept his eyes upon him, although he was careful to conduct his inspection so that the stranger would not be apt to notice it.

"I don't take much stock in you, either, you black-muzzled galoot!" Ginger muttered. "Mebbe you think you kin pull the wool over my eyes by saying that you reckon you don't know the Cowboy Dude—that he ain't the man you thought he was—but I ain't so green as to be fooled that way. You know him well enuff, and I reckon that neither one of you is of much account."

Then Featherstone, having finished his conversation with the landlord, departed from the saloon, and the stranger promptly followed on his heels.

"Oh, wasn't I right?" Dave Ginger exclaimed, the moment he noticed this move. "I reckon I can see as far into a millstone as the next man. And now the cuss has gone to speak to him, and the way he is working this game shows that thar is something wrong 'bout it, 'cos if it is all square and above-board, why didn't he waltz right up to him hyer afore folks and say, 'Old pard, how are ye?'"

The suspicion of the miner was correct that it was the intention of the stranger to accost Featherstone on the street, and for that purpose had followed him.

After the rancher left the saloon he proceeded up the street for a few paces and then halted.

"Let me see!" he exclaimed. "It seems to me that I am as likely to find the boys at Pistol Pete's Palace as anywhere in the town!"

Acting on the idea he turned upon his heel, and, as he did so, came face to face with the stranger.

There was a bright, new moon whose brilliant rays made the street almost as light as by day.

"How are ye, Mister Featherstone?" exclaimed the stranger, ducking his shaggy head in a rude bow.

"How are you?" responded the rancher, casting a searching glance at the man.

"I would like to speak a few words with you if there is no objection."

"None that I know of—go ahead!"

"Well, this place is a little too public," the stranger remarked. "Too near the center of the camp; too many people passing, and some long-eared galoot might catch on to what I say."

"Is what you have to speak about important then?"

"Oh, well, I ain't saying that it is, but thar's no reason why the hull town should know 'bout it, you know," the man replied.

"We can walk up the street a little way and turn off to the left where there is a vacant space with no houses near."

"Wouldn't it be just as well to go round this shanty?" and he nodded to the abandoned shop of the shoemaker. "If we git to the back of that we will be out of the way; no one will notice our talking together, and we kin hold a confab there as nice as you please."

"All right, although it seems to me you are taking a good deal of trouble, and trouble that is not necessary unless your business is more important than I take it to be."

"Oh, well, you will see; it is all right!" the other declared.

"I'll accommodate you, although I don't think there is any necessity for it," the rancher remarked.

Then the two proceeded to the rear of the shanty, and when the stranger saw the woodshed, which joined the edge of the shoemaker's shop, he declared that it was just the place for a "nice little talk."

The moonbeams lighted up the space in front of the structure, but the interior of the building was dark, so that by taking a seat on the woodpile the pair would be concealed from the view of any one passing, and yet they could see if any one approached.

"Hyer we will be jest as snug as a bug in a rug!" the stranger exclaimed as he advanced into the shadows of the shed and took a seat on a big log.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable!"

"I will try to," the rancher replied, as he seated himself upon the chopping-block.

"I suppose you have got onto my disguise by this time," the man observed with an entire change of tone.

"Your disguise!" the rancher exclaimed in a voice full of surprise.

"Yes, although it is a pretty good one and I rather pride myself on it, but I could hardly hope to deceive so sharp an eyed man as yourself."

"Upon my word I hadn't any idea that you were disguised!" the rancher exclaimed.

"Is that so?" the other questioned. "Well then, my get-up is a great deal better than I thought it was."

"It certainly must be very good, for I had no suspicion that you were anything different from what you appear to be."

"Well, you ought to be a good judge of such things, for you are pretty handy at a disguise yourself."

"I?" exclaimed Featherstone in accents of astonishment.

"Yes."

"You are speaking in riddles!"

"Oh, come now! don't you waste your time by trying any game of that kind!" the stranger exclaimed.

"I am not trying any game," the rancher declared.

"Oh, of course not!" the other cried, sarcastically. "You are not the man who hunted me up in Helena and made a certain little arrangement with me, and I will do you the justice of saying that you are as liberal a paymaster as I have ever struck!"

"But this attempt to crawl out of the thing when I have got you down to rights shows that you are not quite so smart as you might be."

"I know that it is only natural for you to attempt to work the trick, for it is your game apparently not to give the thing away, but when you find that I am up to snuff you might as well own right up," the stranger continued. "I am too old a detective to be fooled, you know. If you ask any man who knows me—has followed my career and knows what I have done, you will be told that I am a natural-born bloodhound, possessed of the instincts which enable me to jump to a just conclusion where other men would only be able to get at it by hard, long and patient work."

"This faculty enabled me to spot you the moment you came into the saloon. I knew you by your walk and the peculiar way in which you carry yourself, otherwise I should not have been

able to recognize you, for the disguise you wore when I met you at Helena was a good one, and completely transformed you, but it is a hard thing for a man to change his walk, and only that gave you away."

"When a man is as positive about a thing as you seem to be about this, it is of course a hard matter to convince him that he has made a mistake," the rancher remarked, in his smoothest way.

"Well, I reckon that you couldn't convince me if you talked for a month of Sundays."

"Yes, I perceive that you have made up your mind about the matter."

"And why have I?" the stranger demanded. "Because I know that it is so. I know that I have not made any mistake."

"Now, let me talk a little reason to you," the man continued. "You understand what my mission is up here. I am after the Flour-sack Gang, but I have taken good money to betray Bob Chutney, who put me on the scent, and I am standing in with the band. Do you want me to go ahead and nose out the thing, so as to corner you in such a way that you cannot deny that you are the man who hunted me up in Helena and paid me to go back on Bob Chutney?"

The rancher thought over the matter for a moment.

"Well, no," he said at last, "I reckon that there isn't any need of your going to that trouble."

"I thought not!" the other remarked. "Of course, I appreciate your desire to keep the thing quiet, and it is only natural for you to try and get out of it, but you need not be alarmed, for your secret is perfectly safe with me, and all things considered I think that it is a heap sight better that I should understand just how the land lies, for in case of anything happening which might render it necessary for me to communicate with you it would be awkward if I did not know just how to get at you."

"Yes, that is true."

"You comprehend that with my disguise I have assumed another name," the detective said.

"There are too many men in Montana who know George Haverland by reputation, even if they are not personally acquainted, for me to risk passing under my own name. I now call myself Sandy Smith, which I think is extremely neat, a handle which is natural and familiar and not apt to excite suspicion. I am a miner in search of work and praying to Heaven that I will not find any," and then the detective chuckled loudly at his joke.

"Your disguise is perfect for I did not recognize you, until after we had conversed together for some time," Featherstone remarked.

"Oh, I understand my business and don't you forget it!" Sandy Smith declared. "We shall designate the bloodhound by his assumed name while he masquerades in his disguise."

"And if you had not forced yourself upon my attention I think that it is certain I should not have suspected that you were anything but what you represented yourself to be, and yet I am constantly on the watch for bloodhounds in disguise too," Featherstone remarked.

"Oh, by the way, did you discover the spy that Bob Chutney sent up into this valley?"

"No, neither the man nor the slightest trace of him."

"That is strange," the other remarked with an ominous shake of the head. "The fellow is surely in the camp here, for in the conversation that I overheard, Chutney assured the governor that his spy was in this camp."

"Well, I do not understand it," the rancher replied. "After I got the warning from you to be on the lookout for a spy, a drunken, worthless sort of a bum, who called himself Old Benzine, came to the camp, and I had a suspicion that he was a detective in disguise, so I took a few of my men, we covered our faces with black hoods and we got at him one night."

"That was a cunning game!"

"I had an idea that if he was a spy he would be apt to have letters or some sort of written instructions for his guidance in his pockets, but we did not find a scrap of paper, and though we put the fellow through a pretty severe course of sprouts yet we did not succeed in getting any information out of him."

"Well, was it your opinion after you got through that he was a spy?"

"No, I came to the conclusion that I was wrong in my suspicion," Featherstone replied.

"I have kept a close watch upon the man ever since, but he has not acted in any way suspicious, for about all he does is to drink and gamble."

"And he was the only man that you suspected?"

"Yes, because he was the first stranger to come to the town after I received your warning. You see this camp is on the down grade and we don't have many strangers come. The boom is over in this section and few settlers come up this way."

"Yes, I see," the detective observed. "Well, the man is here somewhere, or else Bob Chutney has been deceived, and it is not an easy job for any one to play roots on him. Is it possible that he has been able to make some

arrangement with a man in the town—an old settler, you know, to work his game for him?"

"That might be—it is possible, of course; I did not think of that," the rancher observed thoughtfully, evidently disturbed by the idea.

"It would be just like my bold Bob to put up a job of that sort, you know. He is up to all sorts of games, and a man in the town would make the best kind of a spy for he would not be apt to be suspected as a stranger might be."

"Yes, that is true, and I reckon that is exactly what the detective has done. But how on earth did he make the arrangement? he has not been in the town."

"The man here might have been an old acquaintance of Chutney's, and it would be an easy matter for Bob to arrange a meeting with the fellow at some neighboring town."

"Yes, yes; it is dollars to cents that you have hit upon the truth!" Featherstone declared.

"Yet, although I have been on the watch, I have not noticed anything suspicious."

"Oh, well, the man may be just keeping his eyes open without trying to make any move."

"That is true, too."

"Would he be apt to learn anything?"

"Hardly!" the Cowboy Dude replied, his brows wrinkled by thought; "yet, now I come to think of it, there is one weak point, and a careful observer, if he noticed it, might suspect that all was not right."

"What is it?"

"There are a couple of my cowboys who have a deal more money than any of the rest of the men; both of them are wild, dissipated fellows, and they will come to the camp every now and then and blow in their duets in the loosest kind of way."

"That isn't very safe," the detective commented. "People will begin to notice it some time, and then the question will naturally come up, where did the men get the money they are throwing away so freely?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I am afraid of."

"You ought to talk to them."

"I have, and both of them promise to be careful how they exhibit their money, but they are men whom you cannot depend upon in such a matter. They mean to do as they say, but when they get to the camp and begin to drink and gamble, they become reckless."

"Well, if I were you, I think I should get rid of a pair like that," the detective remarked.

"The first thing they know they will get their heads into a rope and, may be, endanger you, too."

"I suppose I will have to, but they are fine fellows, brave as lions, just the men for my work. They are both in town on a spree to-night—Parson John and Tony Gorges, they are called—and I expect that there will be a row before they get out of town, for there is a certain sport whom the parson has got it in for, and I should be glad, too, if the parson lays him out, for I hate the fellow, but I am afraid he will be too much for my man."

"A sport that you want fixed, eh?"

"Yes."

"How would you like to have me take the job?" the detective asked. "I reckon I could handle him for keeps!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A BARGAIN.

THE Cowboy Dude reflected over the matter for a moment, for the speech took him completely by surprise.

"Well, I don't know," he said. "I did not think of you in connection with a job of this kind."

"You understand I did not put my cowboy up to attack this sport. It is something that he has gone into on his own hook. The man has managed to win about all the money that Parson John has been able to get hold of for the last four or five weeks and the cowboy feels sore over his repeated losses that he has resolved that if the sharp gets the best of him to-night to get satisfaction out of his hide."

"A very natural conclusion, but will he be able to work the little trick?" the detective asked. "These sports are generally able to take care of themselves and it takes a good man to get away with a sharp if he amounts to anything."

"Well, I am a little afraid that if my man goes into the thing that he will find that he has bitten off more than he can chew."

"What sort of a rooster is this sport?"

"He is named Keene—William Keene, but the boys have shortened his name into Keen Billy."

"And that implies that he is about as sharp as they make them, eh?"

"Oh, there is no doubt about his being a good man in his sporting line," the rancher remarked.

"He is at the top of the heap in this town, but how he is on the fight is something that no one knows, for he has not had any trouble of any kind since coming to the town."

"How does he look—as if he was a warrior?"

"He is a well built fellow enough, a bigger man than I am in every way, and in a fist fight I think he would be too much for me, for I had a little spat with him the other day," the

rancher explained. "I and my foreman, who is a big fellow and an ugly man in a row, tried to bulldoze him a little; we went in to bluff him, you understand, but he 'called' us so quickly that it almost took our breath away!"

"Got the 'drop' on you, I suppose?"

"Yes, that was the game he played, and he worked it like lightning, too, so I have an idea that in a fight he would be a hard man to get at."

"How comes it that he is in this camp?—something crooked in his record, I suppose," the detective suggested, thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes; you can depend upon that, or else he would not be here," Featherstone replied. "And then, he is evidently afraid of an attack, too, from outside parties, of course, for there isn't any one in the camp who would be apt to trouble him, for he has fixed up a cabin on the hillside, and it is so situated that one well-armed, determined man could easily hold it against twenty-five or thirty."

"Yes, I see; and if he had not committed some crime, and knew that he was likely to be pursued, he would not trouble himself about such a fortification."

"It is evident."

"Well, when I asked how you would like me to undertake the job of squaring your accounts with this sport, I was just talking a little wildly," the detective observed. "Sometimes I do shoot off my mouth a deal too loosely, you know, but, really, the idea is not a bad one. I want something to occupy my time, you know, for this business of mine up here is only a blind. My notion, you see, was to remain here for two or three weeks—maybe a month—long enough to make a careful examination of all the surrounding country, and then go to some of the other towns in the neighborhood and spend a while at each one of them, until Chutney got tired of paying the expense bill and ordered me back to Helena."

"Quite a picnic for you!" the Cowboy Dude observed, dryly.

"Oh, yes; and that is the kind of a hairpin I am when I get my mind up," the detective asserted. "Chutney thinks he is one of the greatest men in the detective line that ever lived, and it is really a pleasure to a man of genius like myself to fool him."

"But it will be dull work, of course, for me here without anything to occupy my mind, and this little job of yours will come in right handy; so, if you are open to make a bargain, I am your man!"

"Well, I reckon we can make a trade," the rancher declared. "I want the man to get out of the town; he is in my way as long as he remains here; this is one of the cases with a woman in it."

"Ah, women are generally at the bottom of all mischief!" the other declared.

"It is the daughter of the landlord of the hotel. She is a good-looking, attractive girl and I have taken a fancy to her. Her father and I understand each other all right, but I am afraid that the girl has taken a liking to this sport and that is the reason I want to get him out of the way."

"You had trouble with him and he stood you off?" the detective remarked.

"Yes."

"Then he understands that you are no friend of his and is probably on the watch so that you cannot succeed in getting the drop on him in any way?"

"I think that is very likely."

"But I am a stranger and if we are careful not to be seen together, it will not be possible for him to suspect that I am desirous of doing him any damage."

"No, for him to have any suspicions would partake of the supernatural!" the detective declared, in his confident way.

"That is good!"

"And it is just as simple as simple can be."

"Well, the more simple the plan the better it works sometimes."

"That is generally the rule. Upon thinking the matter over I have come to the conclusion that I ought to get out of here in a week or ten days," the detective remarked. "There are five towns to cover altogether, and I reckon that by the time a month is out, Chutney will get tired of paying my bills and order me home."

"Well, I should say so."

"Now, when I get ready to depart, I will fix up a warrant for the arrest of this sport and nab him!"

"You will have to do it quietly or you will have the whole town about your ears!" the Cowboy Dude declared. "It is the boast of this camp that no officer has ever been able to take a prisoner out, warrant or no warrant."

"Yes, I understand. The warrant is to fool him. I will arrest the man on the charge of being an escaped convict from the East, and arrange the thing so as to take him unawares, outside of the town, and without the knowledge of a single soul in the camp."

"When he finds that I have got him foul, and discovers what the charge is, the chances are big that he will be willing to go with me without making any trouble, for he will reckon this way: I am not the man that this fellow takes me to be

and when I am confronted with my accuser the mistake will be discovered and I shall be released."

"That will be the natural conclusion to which he will come, of course, but I don't exactly see where I am coming in," the rancher remarked.

"Well, it is not perceptible at the first glance," the detective observed. "But I have it arranged all right."

"I will fix the matter so as to jump on my man and capture him late at night—take him as he is going home, you know, and have a couple of horses ready so as to run him right out of the town. I will select a moonlight night so that there will be plenty of light in order that we can see what we are doing. You, with two or three good men, fellows that you can trust, you know, will be in readiness, to waylay us, selecting some spot where everything will be favorable for the working of the trick."

"Yes, yes, I begin to understand," and Featherstone rubbed his hands gleefully together.

"Oh, it is a fine scheme and it will go through for sure!" Sandy Smith declared.

"The beauty of the thing lies in its simplicity," the detective added. "My experience is that the simpler a plan is the better it always works."

"No doubt about that!" the other declared.

"Well, you and your men are in ambush, and along I come with my prisoner, you rush out," the detective explained. "I put spurs to my horse and git as fast as the beast will carry me. Your party will wear some masks on their faces, and the sport will be apt to jump to the conclusion that it is some of the townsmen who have got wind of the thing and come to his rescue."

"Yes, that is probable."

"Then, just by accident, you know, you will fire a shot. All of your party will have their guns out, your finger will slip on the trigger, and, just by accident, your pistol will be pointed so that the bullet will settle the hash of this sport. You can fix that all right without any trouble, I reckon."

"Oh, yes; such a matter can be easily arranged," the rancher assented.

"Well, there is the whole thing, and I reckon it will work as easily as rolling off a log," the detective exclaimed in his boastful way.

"I think you are right. I cannot see any reason why it should not succeed," the Cowboy Dude remarked, after reflecting upon the matter for a few moments. "The only difficult part of the scheme is the surprising of the sport."

"Oh, that does not amount to anything," the other declared.

"I am not so sure of that," Featherstone remarked, with a doubtful shake of the head. "This fellow is no fool, you know."

"Oh, no, of course not. If he was, he could not make a living as a sport."

"That is a fact, and from what I have seen of this man, I have come to the conclusion that he is extra sharp. His nickname, Keen Billy, shows miners' opinion in regard to that matter."

"Yes, and opinions of that kind ain't, as a rule, very far out of the way," the detective remarked. "But no matter how keen this Billy is, you can bet all you are worth that I will fix a trap which will catch him. You see, I go to work in a systematic way in a case of this kind. The first thing I do is to shadow the man for awhile, until I fix out all about his habits, then I arrange my scheme. You see the big advantage I have in a matter of this kind is that the man doesn't have any suspicion there is a plot on foot, and so I get a chance to take him off his guard."

"Oh, I think you can work the trick if you are careful, and I will be glad to pay to get the fellow out of the way."

"Well, sir, inside of a week I will call on you to fork over the ducats!" Sandy Smith exclaimed. This declaration ended the conversation. The pair left the shed, and each went on his way, the detective back to the hotel and the rancher to Pistol Pete's Palace.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE VETERAN'S WARNING.

TEN minutes after the departure of the conspirators another form stood within the old shed. It was the veteran bummer, Joe Bowers.

He had come from his lair in the haunted shop and a huge grin was on his face as he peered carefully out of the shed so as to make sure that the late occupants were not in the neighborhood before he ventured forth.

But there was no danger of his being discovered, as he soon ascertained, and then he came out, but he took the precaution to go in the opposite direction to the one which the conspirators had taken.

"If this hyer don't beat all!" he muttered to himself as he sauntered around the back of the hotel. "It is as big a piece of luck as I have heered on in a dog's age!" he continued. "The idee that them two cusses should pitch onto the old shed to hold their confab, jest where I could hear every word of the talk. And then it was another piece of luck that I happened to git full this afternoon so I had to retire to my downy couch for to sleep it off, or else I should not have

been able to git onto this thing," and then the veteran chuckled gleefully.

"I reckon that me esteemed friend, Keen Billy, will be a leetle astonished when I reveal to him this hyer nice little speculation that these galoots have gone into, but he will not be half as much astonished as they will, when they try to work their trick and find that it can't be done!" And then the bummer chuckled louder than ever.

He proceeded to the hotel saloon and there encountered the sport.

Joe Bowers watched his opportunity and made a sign to Keene, signifying that he wanted to speak to him, and he managed this matter so that no one in the place noticed the signal.

Then Bowers sauntered out and in a few moments the sport followed him.

The veteran was at the upper corner of the hotel and when the sport made his appearance he went around the corner into the shade of the building.

Keene followed him, taking care to assure himself that no inquisitive passer-by was on the watch.

At the rear corner of the hotel, safe from observation, Joe Bowers told what he had overheard.

The sport listened attentively, not interrupting the tale with any comments.

"You see, high and mighty satrap, you will have to keep your eyes open!" Bowers declared, as he finished the recital.

"Well, I generally calculate to keep a pretty good outlook," the sharp remarked. "And now that I know what kind of game these two intend to play they will have to be extra smart to catch me napping."

"If I might venture to remark, me royal nibs, I should suggest that if you caught this galoot a-trying to play any roots, it would be quite the proper caper to play him for keeps and to work the trick so like greased lightning as to make his head swim."

"Oh, that will be my game, of course," the sport replied. "This is one of the cases where a man must not hesitate. He has gone in to work the thing so that it is his life or mine, and you are safe in betting your money that I shall not spare him if it comes to a tussle."

"That is the ticket and no mistake!" Joe Bowers declared, with an approving nod of the head. "In a game of this kind a man cannot afford to throw away any chances."

"That is true," the sport observed. "And you can rest assured that I shall not give away a single point."

"Things have gone along pretty quietly with me ever since I struck this camp," Keene added, reflectively. "But now it looks as if there was a rocky road ahead."

"You are right, me noble lord!" Joe Bowers declared. "There is an old saying, you know, that 'it never rains but it pours,' and now these galoots are going in to make it lively for you. I heerd that this hyer Parson John has been blowing around town to-night that he was going to skin you out of your eye teeth if he could git you to put your money up in a game."

"Well, I reckon it will not require much persuasion to get me to set down with him in a quiet little game," the sport observed.

"And I understand too that the parson has said that if you win much more money off him he is going to see if you are as good on the fight as you are at handling the pasteboards."

"Yes, he has been talking pretty loudly about what he is going to do, and I reckon I am prepared to satisfy the cowboy in any way," the sport replied, significantly.

"Where will the game be likely to take place?"

"At the Great Western Saloon I reckon," the sport replied, "for I just got word from the parson that he would like to see me there in a half-an hour or so, and as that was fifteen or twenty minutes ago, I suppose I ought to be going."

"All right! I will make a pint of dropping into the Great Western in an hour or so," Bowers remarked.

"Do so; by that time the game will be in full blast!"

This ended the conversation.

Bowers returned to the hotel, while Keen Billy took his way to the Great Western Saloon, which was in the outskirts of the town.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LIVELY WORK.

WHEN the sport arrived at the saloon he inquired if the cowboy had been in, and was told he was in the back room.

In the rear of the saloon was a private apartment for the express accommodation of card-parties.

When Keene entered the room he found that play had commenced.

At the table were the two cowboys and a couple of miners, Dave Ginger and a tough, stalwart son of Maine, known as Martin White.

Both of these men were strong friends of the sport, and it was through his calculation that they were in the saloon.

Keen Billy expected trouble and therefore he arranged to have a couple of good men, friends

upon whom he knew he could depend, present, so he would stand a chance to get a fair show in the event of trouble.

And he managed the matter so that the cowboys should not suspect that the presence of the two in the saloon was due to anything but accident.

When they came in, Parson John was loudly proclaiming that he was the biggest chief in the town when it came to a poker game; and expressing his wonder that Keen Billy was so slow in putting in an appearance, considering that he had been invited to a contest.

The pair listened to the cowboy's boasting in regard to the way in which he proposed to treat the sport when he should get him seated at the card-table, and when he came to a stop Dave Ginger remarked in a modest way that he played "keards" himself once in a while and that it took a good man to get away with him.

The cowboy bit at the bait immediately. "Oh, well, I don't mind taking a back at you!" he exclaimed. "It will kinder help to keep my hand in to clean you out while I am waiting for this hyer sport to come!"

"Well, sir, I am your mutton!" the miner replied. "And if you can clean me out you are welcome to do it, but I reckon you will find it to be as tough a job as you ever tackled since you were hatched!"

"Say! I don't mind taking a hand in the game myself," Martin White declared. "I've got a few ducats hyer which are kinder rolling round loose in my pocket, and I reckon I would like to gather in a few more to keep them company."

The cowboy was agreeable.

"The more the merrier!" he declared. The other cowboy, Tony Gorges, caught the gambling fever, and although he seldom played poker, preferring to risk his money at faro or the old Spanish game of monte, yet on this occasion he decided to join the card-party.

The game had only been going on for fifteen or twenty minutes when Keen Billy entered the room, and during the few hands which had been played, fortune had decidedly favored Parson John.

He set up a shout when he saw the sport. "Aha! you have come at last!" he exclaimed. "I was really afraid that you were going to show the white feather, and had begun to think that you would not put in an appearance."

"Well, I may appear to be a little backward in coming forward, but I get there all the same!" Keene replied.

A "pot" had just been captured by Parson John, and he had the cards in his hand, it being his deal, shuffling them vigorously, when Keen Billy entered the room.

"Sit down! you are just in time to enter for this heat!" Parson John cried. "And I hope you have brought plenty of money with you, for I am out for blood this time."

"Oh, I reckon I have got enough to get along with," the sport remarked, as he took a seat. "I am not a national bank, gentlemen, and the man who expects to strike me for a stake big enough to set him up for life, will be apt to be disappointed; but if a thousand or two of dollars will satisfy you, then you can go for me as soon as you like."

"Well, it will content me if I win all you have got," Parson John remarked. "And after I have cleaned you out, if you feel disgusted with life, and want to go and hang yourself, I will lend you a dollar to buy a rope."

"I am very much obliged, I am sure," the sport replied. "But I reckon that there isn't much danger of my troubling you for that accommodation."

"You are perfectly welcome, I am sure!" the cowboy replied, as he dealt the cards around.

But in this case it was the old story of the Irishman and the bull over again.

An Irishman walking along a country road, perceived a bull in a field, and the idea occurred to him that it would be a fine piece of fun if he got over into the meadow and pulled the bull's tail, and the longer he thought over the matter the greater the joke appeared to him, and he laughed in the most hearty manner at the idea, then he climbed the fence. The bull resented the intrusion, and promptly tossed the joker over the fence, into the road. The Irishman picked himself up, bruised and sore in every limb, and as he limped away, exclaimed: "Faix, it was a foine thing I laughed fu'st!"

And so on this occasion it was well for Parson John that he made merry before the game began, for he did not have a chance afterward.

It was as if the entrance of the sport into the contest had "hoodooed" the cowboy, to use the slang of the day.

Not a bit of luck did he have afterward. If he held good hands the rest were so poor in cards that they did not feel inclined to let and so his gains did not amount to anything.

When the betting was lively his cards were certain to be only of medium quality and though on several occasions he had come to the conclusion that the sport against whom he was playing was trying a bluff game and had rashly ventured to bet far more money on his hand than the cards were worth in the hope to scare his adversary out of the field, yet every time

Keen Billy had hung on and met him bet for bet, dollar for dollar, until in desperation Parson John had "called" his opponent, and each and every time Keen Billy captured the money.

Time wore on, and as the hours passed Parson John became more and more desperate.

During the game he had been drinking freely, while the rest had refrained from liquor, understanding that it was not possible for a man to play a good game if his senses were muddled with strong drink.

The game finally resolved itself into a regular duel between Parson John and Keen Billy.

The sport was by far the better player and as luck seemed to favor him, too, by midnight the cowboy was compelled to stop playing for want of money.

He was well under the influence of liquor when the game closed, just in the condition to become ugly and quarrelsome.

With an exclamation of disgust, he threw down his cards.

"I am through!" he cried. "Completely cleaned out!"

"Well, it is about time we stopped operations," the sport remarked, after consulting his watch. "It is just twelve." And then he began to stow away his gains in his pocket.

The two cowboys had lost all they possessed, for both had played in the most reckless manner.

The miners were only out a few dollars apiece, for they had been prudent and had not "plunged" like the ranchers.

Parson John drummed upon the table with his fingers as with hungry eyes he watched the sport put away his gains; finally his anger got the best of him and he cried out: "Say, Keene, I would give a trifle to know whether you play a square game or not!"

"Oh, you are not obliged to give anything to learn the truth about that," the sport responded, speaking quietly enough, although there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes. "You are safe in betting all that you are worth, or ever expect to be worth, that when I sit down to play with square men I play a square game. But what kind of a card-player are you, anyway, if you cannot tell whether you are getting a fair deal or not?"

"I am as good a player as you are!" the cowboy retorted, angrily. "And it is my belief that you have not played a square game, for if you had you would not have been able to clean me out."

"I do not allow any man to talk to me after that fashion!" Keen Billy declared, rising as he spoke. "And as you are evidently desirous of raising a row, if you will come out into the street I will accommodate you."

"All right! I'm your man!" Parson John exclaimed.

And then out to the open air they all went.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SPORT GIVES A LESSON.

THERE were a half-a-dozen men in the outer saloon as the party from the inner apartment passed through it and they immediately followed the others, for they suspected from the way in which Parson John strode along that there was going to be trouble.

Joe Bowers was in the party, for he had managed to discover the whereabouts of the poker-players, and he came along with the rest.

The moon was shining brightly so there was plenty of light.

The street was deserted so the party had it all to themselves.

"Now then I want to see if you are as good a man with your fists as you are at cards!" the cowboy exclaimed.

"Well, I am not one of the kind who is much given to blowing my own horn," the sport observed. "I will say though that I have always been able to hold my own and I hope to do so on this occasion."

"I give you fair warning that I am going in to give you the toughest kind of a warming!" Parson John declared as he rolled up his sleeves, preparing for the contest.

"That is all right," the other remarked, also getting ready for the fray. "I am ready to be hammered if you are able to do it, but until you do accomplish the feat you will have to excuse me for doubting your abilities to do the trick."

"You will find out all about that inside of five minutes!" Parson John declared with a flourish of his arms in the air as he placed himself in position.

"Oh, yes, five minutes ought to be time enough for us both to show what we can do in that line," the sport rejoined.

"Are you ready?" Parson John exclaimed.

"All ready!"

"Hold on, gentlemen!" exclaimed Joe Bowers at this point, unable longer to remain quiet. "You want a referee, you know, if you are going to run this hyer thing in first class style. Now I have seen a heap of affairs of this kind and I reckon I kin fill the bill if you want to give me the job!"

"All right! sail in! I am willing, although I don't reckon to make more than one round out of this scrap," Parson John declared in a boastful way.

"The gentleman will suit me," Keene remarked. "And in regard to the number of rounds, it is my impression that we will be able to tell better about that after we get through than we can now."

"Gentlemen, I will be proud to do my level best for you," the veteran answered. "And I reckon that no matter which way the fight goes, both on you will unite in saying that Old Benzine is as square a man as ever trod in shoe-leather in these hyer Western wilds."

"Now, then, gentlemen, ready is it?"

"You bet!" the cowboy cried.

"Go ahead!" the sport responded.

"Time!" cried Joe Bowers with the air of a man who had the weight of a world upon his shoulders.

The contestants approached each other, and now that they were opposed it was easy to see that the sport was by far the better-built man of the two, and then he was in excellent condition while his opponent was too fat for a struggle of this kind, and his face plainly showed that he had led a life of dissipation which would be certain to operate against him.

There was a wicked look on the bloated face of the cowboy as he faced the sport, which seemed to signify that he meant mischief, and Keene did not fail to notice the expression and so was on his guard.

A few moments the cowboy sparred at his opponent and then he made a sudden dash at him, sending in his blows with wonderful quickness, and from the manner in which they were delivered it was plainly to be seen that Parson John's boast that he knew something of the boxer's art, was not an idle one.

If he had been opposed to an ordinary man who knew nothing of the science of fighting it is pretty certain that his onslaught would have materially damaged his opponent. But on this occasion he was confronted by a man who was more than his match in the use of his fists and much quicker on his legs.

The sport retreated before the attack, cleverly parrying the blows, and then when Parson John in his disgust at not being able to nail his man tried a second rush, even fiercer than the first, the sport instead of retreating ducked in a wonderfully skillful way under the arm of the cowboy as he made his impetuous advance; then, as Parson John turned—and clumsy indeed was the way in which he performed this movement—the sport dealt him a terrific blow under the ear with his right fist which sent the cowboy to the ground.

Parson John fell as the steer falls before the blow of the butcher.

The crowd sent up a yell of delight, for they were glad to see the cowboy thus rudely handled; there was no love lost between the miners and the ranchmen and so all their sympathy was with the sport.

"First knock-down for Mister Keene!" Old Benzine declared with the air of a judge. "I ain't got no watch for to count the time, but I reckon I kin guess at it near enuff. I will count fifty which will be 'bout right, I reckon. You cowboy, why don't you pick yer man up?" the veteran continued addressing Tony Gorges. "A healthy kind of a second you are!" And then he began to count.

Tony Gorges had but little comprehension of the duties which had thus suddenly devolved on him, for half-breeds such as he was seldom indulge in fist fights, always being prompt to use a weapon when they get into a quarrel. Besides the man's brains were so muddled by the large quantity of liquor which he had drank that he hardly knew what he was doing, but he knew enough to obey the injunction of Joe Bowers.

He assisted Parson John to rise.

"The scoundrel! you must murder him this time!" the half-breed said in the cowboy's ear.

"He is a hard hitter," Parson John muttered, his sense still dazed by the terrific blow.

"Ah, you should have tried a pistol or knife!" Tony declared.

By this time Joe Bowers had come to fifty, so he stopped counting and yelled out: "Time!"

In a half-mechanical way the cowboy faced his opponent and put up his hands.

The sport perceived immediately that his opponent was not himself and he was quick to take advantage of the fact, for he commenced hostilities the moment he faced his foe.

He made a feint of striking at Parson John's head with his right, then, as the other threw up his arms to ward off the blow, the sport reached the cowboy's wind with his left fist, giving him a stroke just below the heart which made the other grunt with pain.

Roused into action by these liberties, Parson John made a desperate attempt to turn the tide of battle, for he was conscious that it was going against him.

He made another desperate rush at his antagonist, but as before the sport retreated from him, letting him waste his strength upon the empty air.

A dozen terrific blows the cowboy struck at the sport, but only one or two reached him, and these did no damage; then, when Parson John paused, breathless from his exertion, Keene again gave him a blow in the wind, following:

up the attack by a series of strokes at the cowboy's head.

These blows were not intended to do any serious damage, though, only to confuse his opponent, for the sport was watching for a chance to get in a "right hand swing" and a knock-out blow on the jaw.

Parson John retreated before the attack, a pretty well used-up man, not so much from the damage he had received from his opponent as from the exertions he had made, and being so out of condition had told fearfully against him.

A man with forty or fifty pounds of useless fat is in no fit state to indulge in violent muscular exercise.

The cowboy was tired, his wind was gone and it was the hardest kind of work for him to keep his ground and parry the vicious blows which his opponent was sending in so freely.

At last the chance came for which the sport had been waiting, and he was quick to improve it.

With a mighty effort he swung in his right and catching Parson John on the point of the jaw administered a blow which caused every tooth in the cowboy's head to rattle.

Over backward went Parson John, coming to the earth like a log toppled over, and there he lay stunned—completely insensible.

The cowboy had been "knocked out" by the sport in the fairest kind of way.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BRINGING MATTERS TO A FOCUS.

WHEN Parson John came to his senses, which was not until a good three minutes had elapsed, he acknowledged in a sulky way that he had got enough, and departed accompanied by the half-breed.

The miners were delighted at the victory obtained by the sport, and it was with difficulty that he got away from the enthusiastic crowd.

Bowers volunteered to accompany him a little way on his homeward road, and the two departed.

"Well, old pard, you have got to keep yer eyes peeled now!" the veteran asserted.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that."

"These cowboys will have it in for you now, and you will probably find yourself in a shooting match the first thing you know."

"Yes, I should not be surprised, but I reckon they will find that I am as ready with my pistols as I am with my fists," Keene remarked.

"And then there is that other galoot—that fly-cop, as a city man would say," Bowers observed. "He is going to make it lively for you the first chance he gets."

"I have been thinking a little in regard to him during the progress of the game to-night, and have made up my mind to take the bull by the horns as soon as possible," the sport declared. "I don't relish the idea that there is a man in the camp watching his opportunity to jump on me whenever he thinks there is a good chance."

"Tain't pleasant, for sure!"

"No, and there is the risk that by some unfortunate chance I might be taken at a disadvantage, and it is not possible for a man to be always on the lookout, you know."

"That is so!" Bowers assented. "The smartest man makes a mistake sometimes."

"Yes, and then there is the chance of accident to be considered, too," the sport remarked. "Something might happen so that I would be completely at his mercy."

"That is correct, me noble dook."

"And I am one of the kind of men who does not like to be kept in suspense either. When an affair of this kind comes up, I want to have it settled as soon as possible and then it is off my mind."

"I reckon you are right; I hate myself to be kept in suspenders," the veteran observed with a grin.

"So, as I know the little game this fellow intends to play, I propose to make him show his hand as soon as possible," the sport declared. "I shall watch for a favorable opportunity and then call him to an account."

"S'pose he denies and swears that he ain't up to no game?"

"I shall have to use some pretty plain language to him, and if he possesses any backbone there will be a fight there and then."

"The cuss will be astonished when he finds out that you are onto him," the veteran declared with a chuckle.

"Yes and it will puzzle him to guess how I gained my information."

"Be sure not to give me away!"

"Have no fear. I will be careful about that," Keene replied. "He will be apt to suspect that some one overheard his conversation with the rancher, but it will not be possible for him to guess who it was."

"Yes, I reckon I am safe."

By this time the two had reached the path which led to the cabin of the sport, so Bowers bid him good-night and took his way back to the camp.

"Things are working as nicely as kin be!" the veteran declared, communing with himself as he walked along. "Couldn't go better if every-thing was greased."

"This hyer Cowboy Dude has played a pretty good game and I reckon he thinks that he is about as smart as they make 'em, but he may change his mind about that before he is a month older."

And so the veteran went on his way, feeling extremely well-satisfied with himself.

When the sport reached his cabin he at once retired to rest, and slept as sleeps the man free from the weight of cankering care.

He was up early in the morning, and after he got his breakfast proceeded to examine his weapons.

He withdrew the cartridges and oiled the revolvers, then carefully loaded them again.

"I must be sure that they are in good working order," he murmured. "My life may depend upon the way the tools work before this day is ended."

And when he had got his weapons in a condition to satisfy him, he replaced them in their holsters and went forth.

"Hello! here is a piece of luck!" he exclaimed as he ascended the narrow trail.

He had caught sight of the disguised detective—the man who called himself Sandy Smith.

The stranger was sauntering along the main road with a hammer in his hand and a small pick slung on his back.

"He is playing miner and trying to make out that he is on a prospecting tour," the sport observed. "Such a role as that gives him a chance to prow around the country without exciting any suspicion."

Smith was coming up from the town and as the sport turned into the main road he was only some twenty feet away.

"How are ye?" the detective exclaimed. "I am out to see if I can't strike some pay dirt, but I don't suppose there is much chance in this region, for I reckon the ground has been pretty well examined."

"You are right about that," Keene replied. "There is not a foot of ground within twenty miles of this camp which has not been examined by veteran prospectors a dozen times, so your chances of striking a lead are extremely small."

"Well, I was afraid that there wasn't much show for me, still I have known good things to be struck in a district which had been thoroughly examined."

"Oh, yes, there is a possibility that you may find pay-dirt, just as there is a chance that you may be struck by lightning."

"You don't speak very encouragingly," the disguised detective remarked.

"What is the use of feeding you on false hopes?" the sport inquired. "My idea is that in all cases of this kind it is better to speak the truth."

"Maybe so."

"And speaking of truth, that reminds me that I have a few plain words to say to you," the sport said, abruptly.

The other looked surprised.

"To me?" he exclaimed.

"Yes; you think that you are playing a pretty deep game, but I can tell you that you are not half so smart as you think."

The detective stared and scowled, being both surprised and annoyed.

"I reckon I don't understand what you are driving at," he observed.

"You call yourself Sandy Smith, I believe."

"Yes, that is my handle."

"But down in Helena you are a heap sight better known as George Haverland!" Keene declared.

The face of the bloodhound grew dark at finding himself thus discovered, but after a moment's thought he tried to put the best face he could upon the matter.

"Oh, you are barking up the wrong tree!" he declared, pleasantly, just as if he considered the matter to be a joke. "But I don't wonder at your making the mistake, for I reckon I must look a deal like this Haverland you speak of, for I have been taken for him before."

"That dodge will not work!" the sport exclaimed. "You cannot fool me with any ghost story of this kind. I know that you are George Haverland, the detective from Helena, and what is more, I am aware that you have entered into a nice little arrangement with this Cowboy Dude, Gilbert Featherstone, to get me into trouble."

This announcement took the disguised detective so completely by surprise that he was not able to conceal his amazement.

"What are you talking about?" he blurted out at last.

"Now don't attempt to deny that this is true, for you will be wasting your breath!" Keene exclaimed. "I know all about the bargain that you made with Featherstone—how you volunteered for a certain sum of money to get me out of the way, but you see as I am up to the game it will not work!"

The truth now flashed upon the bloodhound; the conversation between himself and the rancher had been overheard by some spy who had reported the particulars to the sport.

For the moment he was bothered, and knew not how to treat the matter.

As it was apparent that the sport knew all about the conversation between himself and the

Cowboy Dude, it would be idle for him to attempt to lie out of the matter.

Then the notion suddenly came to Haverland that the best thing for him to do would be to bring matters at once to a climax.

The spot was a lonely one, no witnesses near, and he could make the sport a prisoner now as well as at any other time.

The bloodhound having resolved upon this course was prompt to act.

He prided himself upon being "quick on the draw," and so plucked out his revolver with marvelous speed, but Keene anticipated that the detective would do something of this kind, and so he was on the alert.

The look in the eyes of the other warned him of the movement before it was made, and as the sport was equally as quick on the draw as the detective he got first fire.

The bullet passed through the right wrist of Haverland just as he brought his pistol up to the level and then buried itself in his chest, so the ball of the detective sped harmlessly by the sport.

Haverland gave utterance to a groan and fell forward upon his face.

Then a shout went up; two miners who were coming up the trail toward the valley, had approached near enough to witness the fight, their presence unsuspected by the combatants.

"This is lucky," the sport murmured to himself, as the men hastened forward. "These men will be able to testify that it was a fair fight, and that my antagonist began the trouble."

When they came up, the pair congratulated the sport upon his victory.

"The cuss tried to git the drop on ye, but he couldn't come it!" one declared with a chuckle.

"What riled the galoot to make him go for ye?" the other inquired.

"Oh, nothing much. He was spoiling for a fight, I reckon," the sport replied, carelessly.

Then an examination was made of the wounded man; one of the miners professed to be quite a doctor, and he announced that, although the stranger was seriously wounded, yet it was his opinion that he would get over his hurt if proper care was given, and he immediately proceeded to bandage the wound, while his companion and Keene set off for the camp to procure assistance.

The report of the fight created a deal of talk, and the citizens came to the conclusion that Keen Billy was a chief of great renown.

The wounded man was conveyed to the hotel and made as comfortable as possible, while the sport became the hero of the hour.

The news of this encounter soon came to the ears of Gilbert Featherstone, and he was annoyed, for he had not expected that any trouble would occur so quickly.

He was prompt to call upon the wounded man.

Haverland was utterly disgusted at the way that things had gone, and had no hesitation in declaring that he would have no more to do with the sport.

"I made a bad break, but I am not fool enough to keep on!" he exclaimed. "The man is too much for me, and I will not try him on again."

The rancher saw that it would be useless to attempt to persuade the detective to change his mind, and so he did not try to do so, but withdrew in a very gloomy mood.

CHAPTER XXX.

A SURPRISE.

A WEEK from the day that the events related in our last chapter took place, Gilbert Featherstone and Black Tom Murphysat together in the principal room of the ranch.

It was night, and the hands of the clock on the mantel-piece pointed to the hour of ten.

With the exception of the cowboy in charge of the corral the two were alone on the ranch, for all the rest had gone to a dance which the landlord of the hotel had got up.

The Cowboy Dude was feeling very much out of sorts, for things lately had not been going to his satisfaction.

"You seem rather dull to-night," Murphy remarked.

"Yes, I do feel that way. I don't know exactly how it is, but I have a sort of presentiment that there is trouble ahead."

"Oh, I don't take no stock in anything of that kind!" Murphy declared. "You don't feel well—your liver is out of order, or something of that kind is troubling you."

"No, no; I am well enough physically, but things are not going on to my satisfaction," Featherstone replied. "I have been keeping a watch on Blanche Valentine for the past few days and she has acted in a way that makes me suspect that she has been warned of the little game that I intend to play."

"Oh, but that ain't possible!" Black Tom Murphy exclaimed.

"Well, I know that it does not seem to be, but she acts in that way. She used to take long rides, but she has given that up, and now does not go far from the camp, generally goes on foot now, too, and her favorite walk is down the trail in the direction of this Keene's cabin."

"Mebbe she goes to meet him," the other suggested.

"Yes, that is my idea. I have tried to play the spy on her a couple of times, but it was no go. She is too wide awake—keeps her eyes open, and is evidently afraid of being watched."

"So you couldn't work it?"

"No, and she is keeping such a good lookout that I have serious doubts whether I will be able to come the Black-cap business on her."

"Oh, you will get a chance in time," Murphy asserted, confidently. "You want to play a waiting game, you know, wait and watch your chances. The opportunity is bound to come if you wait long enough, but you must be careful not to scare her by telling her that you are keeping your eyes upon her movements, for if you do all the fat will be in the fire."

"You can be sure that I will not make any false move!" the rancher exclaimed. "It may be possible that she is meeting Keene secretly, and is afraid that it will be found out, so she keeps her eyes open, to be sure she is not followed."

"That is likely."

"The devil will be in it, though, if I cannot contrive some plan to insnare the girl!" Featherstone declared.

"Well, seeing that you have the help of the old man, you surely ought to be able to do it," Murphy remarked.

"That is so, but I should feel a great deal surer that I could do the trick if this Keene was out of the way."

"No doubt 'bout that."

"And that old bummer, too, who is loafing around the camp, Old Benzine, do you know that I mistrust that rascal? I think he is a spy, although we were not able to get anything out of him when we tried the pumping process."

"I reckon that he is a sly rascal, and as cute as they make 'em, although he is full of bug-juice 'bout all the time."

At this point the door opened suddenly and a dozen men rushed into the room.

The pair grasped their weapons and sprung to their feet, but their hostile intentions were checked by the stern command:

"Hands up!"

And the admonition was enforced by the leveled tubes of a dozen revolvers.

The surprise was complete.

"What do you mean by this outrage?" the rancher demanded, slowly elevating his hands as he spoke.

"That you two are my prisoners!" responded the leader of the intruders.

"And who may you be?" the Cowboy Dude exclaimed.

"My name is Robert Chutney, and I am a detective officer," was the reply.

It was indeed the noted bloodhound, and by his side was the sport, William Keene, while Joe Bowers, the Old Benzine of Ricaree City, grinned at the discomfited pair from the rear of the throng.

"You have played a bold game, Gilbert Featherstone, but have come to grief at last," the detective continued.

"You are speaking in riddles!" the rancher exclaimed, keeping up a bold front. "What charge do you make against me?"

"Highway robbery!" Chutney replied. "You are the chief of the Flour-sack Gang of road-agents and this ranch is your headquarters."

"Bah! such an accusation is ridiculous!" Featherstone cried, contemptuously.

"Oh, no, it isn't! I have got you dead to rights and don't you make any mistake about it!" the detective retorted. "You have played the game splendidly, but the jig is up now. You managed to buy Haverland but he has gone back on you and made a full confession."

A bitter oath came from the lips of the rancher at this announcement.

Then in obedience to Chutney's orders the pair were disarmed and handcuffs slipped upon their wrists.

"There is one consolation," the rancher observed after this little ceremony was completed. "You will never be able to get us out of this camp."

"Oh, you think so do you?" Chutney remarked.

"I know it!" Featherstone replied. "When the men of the camp discover that you are officers they will rise as one man and cut you off!"

"Well, all I have to say about that matter is that if they try any such game as that they will find they have taken up the biggest kind of a contract," the detective remarked.

"I did not rush blindly into this thing, you know, but counted every step in advance," he continued. "I have twenty well-armed men, and I reckon that if the inhabitants of this camp are anxious for a fight I can give them all they want and a little more too, maybe! I have managed to corral you two without any trouble and I reckon I can gather in your cowboys when they return from the shindig."

The face of the rancher was dark with passion, while Black Tom Murphy's countenance showed that he had a good claim to his nickname.

Then Featherstone caught sight of Joe Bowers's grinning face in the background.

"You scoundrel!" he cried, hoarse with passion. "This is your doings."

"Oh, you kin bet your life that Old Benzine was to the fore!" the veteran exclaimed.

Things turned out as the detective anticipated.

The cowboys were all well under the influence of liquor when they returned, and were easily captured.

A search had been made, and ample proofs to convict the men were discovered, and then, in the dead hours of night, the detective took his prisoners through the camp, and so successfully was the movement performed that not until morning was the truth known, and then, even if the inhabitants of the town had any idea of interfering, it was too late; but, when the miners heard the story, they did not feel like getting mixed up in the matter, for they did not relish the notice that a band of road-agents should have a headquarters in their valley.

Chutney got his prisoners safely to Helena, and there they were duly tried and convicted, which enabled the detective to pocket the reward.

A week after the downfall of the rancher, Keene sought Big John Valentine and asked for the hand of his daughter.

The old man responded in a doleful way; he could not get on if Blanche left him, and then the sport planked down five hundred dollars, thus literally buying his bride.

Quietly the pair left the camp, went to Helena, and there were married.

They tarried but a few days in Helena, and went southward to New Mexico, where the sport proposed to turn over a new leaf—to lead a new life.

After the departure of the lovers, Joe Bowers remained but a few days in the camp.

"Too slow, too much like a graveyard, for a royal nibe, like myself, and so I'll seek fresh fields and pastures new," he said. "Adieu, and don't forget the king of bums, Old Benzine!"

THE END.

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